

The Rhetoric of Individualism in *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad*, and *The Wire*

Research Thesis

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## Introduction

### Digital Consumption

*When you're young, you look at television and think, There's a conspiracy. The networks have conspired to dumb us down. But when you get a little older, you realize that's not true. The networks are in business to give people exactly what they want. That's a far more depressing thought. Conspiracy is optimistic! You can shoot the bastards! We can have a revolution! But the networks are really in business to give people what they want. It's the truth.*

- Steve Jobs

In a May 1996 interview on *Charlie Rose*, David Foster Wallace, along with two fellow novelists, discussed “the future of fiction in the information age.” Much of the conversation focused on the merits of literature in an American culture that doesn’t seem to care like it used to, engrossed instead with its entertainment-driven television programs. This tension was a central question of the interview: if people are spending their free time watching television, what does that mean about the future of literature (a supposedly more edifying and meaningful pastime)? More importantly, what does that mean about American culture and its future? As Wallace argued, while heavy television watching can be thoroughly amusing, it doesn’t come without its catches: “It would be one thing if everyone was absolutely delighted watching television 24/7,” he said, “but we have, as a culture, not only an enormous daily watching rate but we have a tremendous cultural contempt for TV.” Wallace ascribed this psychological tension to the distracting nature of television, saying that, “There’s this way in which we who are watching a whole lot are also aware that we’re missing something, that there’s

something else, that there's something more." Indeed, although Americans watch television 2.8 hours a day (according to the USDLA), watching often seems to be on par, guilt-wise, with eating McDonald's and smoking cigarettes; and, in fact, television's addictive qualities have been studied by psychologists and the conclusions have been that watching television does encourage some addictive tendencies (Baker, Csikszentmihalyi, 2004).

But, in a sense, we already knew this. Like Wallace, Americans have seen television as a vice since its invention, a waste of time and space. At some point, it picked up the unflattering moniker "the boob tube" and is often colorfully derided. Former FCC chairman Newton Minow famously declared television to be a "vast wasteland," and everyone from Groucho Marx to John Lennon to Bill Hicks have made their distaste for television known, pointing to its dulling and mindless qualities. In all, it's challenging to pinpoint the cause of this dissonance in the cultural psyche. As many, like Wallace, see the issue, the problem with television is that it is a means of pure indulgence; not difficult, not requiring engagement; and for the most part it not educational or informative; but simply a medium of wasted time—pure, distilled, uncompromising entertainment. In other words, a rather perfect consumer product. As my epigraph to this introduction points to, it is a matter of people being given what they desire—entertainment—and yet being seemingly overwhelmed by how well the television industry has supplied.

In the late 1990s, however, a shift began to occur in television programming that seemed to remedy the television malaise. Since the early 1990s, HBO, a paid subscription programming network, had been increasing its efforts to create original television series and struck gold in 1999 with the now-classic *The Sopranos*. In their promotion of the network's original drama, HBO made a marked effort to portray it as something other than typical "boob tube" programming, running for almost thirteen years with the tagline, "It's not TV. It's HBO." For thirteen years (from 1996 through 2009), HBO wanted to make a point with the slogan: what they were producing was not what viewers commonly associated with television, but something good and worthwhile, intellectual and artistic. New shows fueled by the consumer demand for quality television started to pop up, most of them on HBO and Showtime and (more recently) on AMC and Netflix. Once again, viewers had been given what they wanted: television that didn't make them feel like they were wasting their time and melting their own brains. Instead, the programming was (and still is) intentionally more intellectual, more finely produced, more daring. This newly-broken ground has come to be known as the Third Golden Age of Television, a title awarded to a generation of television series that have changed the nature of the medium.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The First Golden Age was in the 1950s, when television was a young, exciting prospect for serious writers and actors; and the Second was in the 70s, when the sitcom was

### *The Really Real*

One of the primary reasons for the success of these shows is that, quite simply, they were *really* good. The acting was impressive, as was the writing and production. In addition, being on a network like HBO, where typical FCC guidelines do not apply, shows could be more risky and “honest” with their content; they could include swearing, graphic violence, nudity, drug use, etc. But, when it came to high-quality shows such as *The Sopranos*, these allowances did not become mere excuses to draw viewers in with blood and sex (not that the show lacks either). Instead, the absence of guidelines made it possible for shows such as *The Sopranos* to depict something else: real life (even if that may seem somewhat ironic). Television had become known for its regulated, sanitized content, its “turning away” from violence and gritty reality, and it could certainly be argued that this is a primary reason that it was not seen as a respected medium. But HBO, without censorship, could transcend the typical limitations of a television show and make something unrestrained, real, and artistic. Thus, the lead character, Tony Soprano, is not a traditional, morally upright protagonist; in fact, quite the opposite is true of Tony. He’s a New Jersey crime boss, a murderer and thief, an extortionist, racist, chauvinist, and homophobe; he cheats on his wife and emotionally abuses his children, stabs his friends in the back, and so on and so forth. But regardless of these unsavory attributes, it worked, seeming genuine and authentic.

While this notion of a criminal, immoral protagonist no longer seems so surprising, it was, while not a new theme, taken further than before at the time. Some at HBO (most notably Chris Albrecht, then-CEO and Chairman at the network) thought that when *The Sopranos*, in the fifth episode of the first season, depicted Tony Soprano killing a man, the camera gaping unflinchingly as he strangles his victim with some electrical wire, that they would lose their audience (Martin. People wouldn't be able to relate to that level of violence and not condemn the supposed hero, the argument went. But people became all-the-more intrigued, and the scene changed television forever, many believe for the better; it had become art. Since then, Dexter has been killing in the name of true justice (and bloodlust suppression), Walter White has been cooking methamphetamine to provide for his family (and escape his own existential vacuum), and a multitude of other antiheroes have similarly been doing the wrong things for understandable reasons. The Third Golden Age became fascinated with the psychologized character drama, especially with lead characters who blur moral lines and butt up against institutions and collective systems. Indeed, it would almost seem that a protagonist is no longer interesting without some type of significant moral failing.

However, what these shows tend to do so excellently is portray the hang-up as noble in some way, and the protagonists are always somehow exonerated—in fact, the idea that television protagonists have become less moral does not really hold true.

Instead, these protagonists are supported by the narrative, and the audience is compelled to be sympathetic with them, even in the face of apparent immoral actions. Ultimately, the mantra of the Third Golden Age may very well be “Explanation is Exculpation.” While the protagonists do things that, unfiltered, a contemporary American audience would find reprehensible, they are portrayed in such a way so that they are understandable, human, and (once again) real. This may be accomplished through an explanation of biological nature (as with *Dexter*), maternal conflict (as with *The Sopranos* and Don Draper from *Mad Men*), institutional constraint (as with *Luther*, *The X-Files*, and *Breaking Bad*), or deeply-engrained psychological neurosis (as with *House*). The individual is exonerated, and set up as the force capable of overcoming something beyond his or her control—often something systemic and social.

### *Television and the Rhetorical Appeal*

Individualism is by no means a new trope in American television. James W. Chesebro, in his essay “Communication, Values, and Popular Television Series—A Twenty-Five Year Assessment and Final Conclusions,” reports, as the title indicates, on a twenty-five year study (from 1974-1999) in which he examined the value systems displayed in popular television shows. He found that, “[W]hile variations are possible, the vast majority of primetime television entertainment—some 70 percent of all series—has promoted the same two values — individuality and authority— during the last twenty-five years” (398). And yet, while individualism is not new to television, the

Third Golden Age has doubtlessly discovered a new kind of portrayal of the individual, both modifying and extending the trope through its antiheroic interests.

Of primary interest to this thesis is what these modifications and reinforcements of individualism in Third Golden Age television dramas mean about current American ideology. Hence, this study is geared toward the rhetorical appeal of these shows; that is, how, through the underlying value of individualism, these shows represent and support cultural ideology and, in turn, derive their appeal and entertainment therein. Television is not something that functions apart from culture, but is deeply engrained within it. Too often television is perceived as being purely about entertainment, and is often quickly dismissed because of it. And, when it comes to the Third Golden Age, television programs are similarly taken for granted, not as cultural outworking. However, on the other hand, one may very well ask, What makes something entertaining? Why do we watch what we watch? In his introduction to his report, Chesebro writes:

It would be a mistake to believe that these primetime dramatic network programs function only as “pure escapist entertainment.” These series are designed to entertain, but they are often constructed to convey ‘messages’ to their viewers. Producers of these series freely admit that persuasive intent guides the development and execution of the entertainment they provide. These producers intentionally formulate and portray certain values as more desirable



than others. In this sense, certain kinds of characters and plot developments are designed to foster and to reinforce certain value judgments but not others" (368).

As Chesebro points to in this excerpt, "messages" and "entertainment" are not two independently-functioning aspects of television programs. In fact, they are rather inextricably linked, the messages often filled with "persuasive intent" to create an entertaining series. In other words, the entertainment of television is wrapped up in its messages—the values—behind the action.

Consequently, I want to look closely at a few of the Third Golden Age's most notable series and consider the ways in which they derive their entertainment through the display of the virtue of individualism and, conversely, through the lessening (and sometimes outright avoidance) of collective and societal concern. First, I am going to look at the godfather series of the Third Golden Age, *The Sopranos*, focusing on the ways in which Tony Soprano both reinforces and modifies the portrayal of individualism in American media. Second, I am going to focus on *Breaking Bad*, a show that rather radically rethinks portrayals of masculinized individuality, making it more relevant to contemporary American culture. Finally, I will look at a contrasting portrayal of American individualism with *The Wire*. *The Wire*, like *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, does find institutions to be a sort of constraint on individuals; however, unlike these other two shows, it does not find resolution in the individuals, but instead in systemic change.

Before moving on to discuss the significance of individualism in America, I would like to briefly discuss my usage of the words *individualism* and *collectivism*. Both of these terms can be confusing and don't necessarily represent any exact ideology. My use of the word individualism primarily refers to what Chesebro means when he writes that individuality functions as a resolver of symbolic conflict (367). That is, the notion of the individual, represented by a television character, is the agent of resolution for a specific crisis or tension; they have the power to enact change and create (and give) meaning. Conversely, by the term *collectivism* I mean the notion that collective effort, comprised of group-oriented thinking, is the more effective or necessary effort than that of each solitary individual. (Hence, I don't mean it in the communist sense.) Of course, there's a lot of overlap between these terms; neither of them effectively represent political parties (or persuasions), nor do they, as a binary, fit any person perfectly. Instead, for the purposes of this thesis, I treat the binary as a continuum: notions of individuality and collectivity do coexist, but that isn't to say that cultural preference does not lean toward one side or the other. One of the purposes of this thesis is to explore the question of how television represents an American preference for individuality, at least when it comes to its entertainment.

### *American Individualism and/or Collectivism*

By focusing on some of the drawbacks of portrayals of individualism, I do not mean to take on individualism as an ideology, necessarily. Instead, in studying the

rhetorical appeal behind this sort of ideology, the focus is more on the ways in which culture generates, valorizes, and reproduces ideology, and how popular culture manifests these ideologies in appealing to viewers. In a way, it's similar to analyzing advertisements, which also work by appealing to a viewer through usually-undisclosed ideological appeals, whether that's a beer commercial linking their brand to masculinity or an insurance commercial employing self-deprecating humor and a sense of friendliness. So, the thing analyzed, when studying rhetoric, is not the ideology itself, but how the ideology is presented, given value, and utilized to resonate with others who have a similar perception of a given ideology. That is, it involves asking why masculinity and self-deprecating humor are cultural values (i.e., what they uphold), and the ways in which they are utilized.

A rhetorician that this thesis is indebted to is James V. Catano, whose book *Ragged Dicks: Masculinity, Steel, and the Rhetoric of the Self-Made Man* focuses on the ways in which American culture has produced the value of the self-made man, a primary facet of American individualism. Catano argues that gender norms, such as masculinity, "are dependent upon arguments that are motivated and underwritten by *doxa* [self-evident givens], a complex set of desires, needs, rituals, beliefs, and practices that are internalized, and naturalized, by the members of a society" (3). It may seem somewhat counterintuitive that a collectivity would have individualism as an organizing principle. However, as Paul Stob writes, "When it brings people together, the rhetoric of

individualism creates community” (27). Stob, in his essay “The Rhetoric of Individualism and the Creation of Community: A View from William James’ ‘The Will to Believe,’” focuses especially on the ways in which William James “spoke the language of individualism, but this language gave people a set of ideas around which they could gather as a community.”

Indeed, there’s little doubt that American society has, for quite some time now, been deeply invested in individualism. Like William James’ “Will to Believe,” Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden* has long stood as a seminal text of American philosophy. Even the ways in which we learn about our world, including the past, are often filtered through this manner of thinking. For example, when we think about great inventions and theories, historical movements and social change, we tend to point to individuals as the catalysts, which functions as a means of supporting the notion of individual effort and self-making. To us, people like Darwin, Edison, and Lincoln maintain a more prominent position in the cultural psyche than the communities that led to the ability for these individuals to play a big part in change. The rest of the story is often ignored. The societal and cultural change that allowed for individuals to become successful is not part of the primary story—even though, without it, there would be no story, there would be no innovation. It’s certainly true that individuals make a difference, I do not discount that; however, when an individual is a member of a greater collectivity, the

individual is governed by collective concern, which plays into all sort of norms, expectations, and value systems.

Chesebro, in his report, quotes psychologists Lindesmith, Strauss, and Denzin, who write that “the earlier conclusion that the self is a social product has scarcely changed at all” (394). I will look at this more closely in the chapter on *The Wire*, and in the conclusion, but it’s worth beginning to think about now. After all, what could be the cultural ramifications for creating and substantiating individualistic ideology? Stob writes about the importance of autonomy for individualism, and the ways in which this manifests itself as anti-authoritarian: “Institutional confrontation is key to individualist narratives,” he writes (26). This is the primary reason that I’ve chosen *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* as exemplars of the Third Golden Age’s fascination with individuals: they’re criminals who blatantly confront the system. However, what about the ways that this outworking reflects American ideology in real life, and how will this affect the ways that we think about ourselves, both as individuals and as a collective?

By examining the rhetorical appeals of these series, I will be thinking about the ways in which the narratives make arguments in promotion of the value of individuality. In a sense, all cultural symbols and productions are inlaid with messages that “argue” for a certain interpretation of the world, even if the interpretation is not intentional. Concordantly, they offer perspectives on ethics, values, philosophy, etc. A show’s unique perspective is presented and argued through

numerous narrative and cinematic techniques, some of which I will discuss in this thesis (especially narrative techniques such as scope), which largely help determine an audience's reaction to the show. As I discussed earlier, I understand entertainment as linked closely to value systems: why a show is entertaining has a lot to do with what it believes in. Hence, by examining the rhetorical appeals of these shows, we can learn about their value systems, which, really, are our value systems.

## Chapter 1

### Consider the Mobster

*All due respect, you got no fuckin' idea what it's like to be Number One. Every decision you make affects every facet of every other fuckin' thing. It's too much to deal with almost. And in the end you're completely alone with it all.*

— Tony Soprano

As discussed in the introduction, television has not historically been considered highbrow entertainment. In some ways, of course, it is still not considered to be so, with the statistic of just how many hours a day Americans watch television (2.8, according to the USDL) often cited as an exemplification of how much time we waste, an exemplification, at the extreme end, of the intellectual and moral decline of American culture. Nevertheless, the now-booming Third Golden Age of Television has increasingly challenged this norm, consisting of shows that are widely considered by intellectuals and critics to be exceptions to the rule. So much so, in fact, that it now seems almost expected that serious academics in the humanities not only be able to converse eruditely about *Moby Dick*, but also about *Mad Men*, *Breaking Bad*, and *True Detective*. Therefore, this Third Golden Age carries with it not only mainstream appeal, but also high-brow credibility. The reason for this is that these shows, freed from the constraint of censorship from network television, deal with more difficult subject matters in a supposedly more truthful, intellectual, and complex manner.

The first of these was the now-legendary *The Sopranos*, which centers on the life of modern-day New Jersey mob boss, Tony Soprano. Tony is by no means a typical

television protagonist; he is a murderer, a thief, an extortioner; and this does not include his non-criminal, domestic offenses: he unapologetically cheats on his wife throughout the show, mistreats his children, expresses racist ideals, and manipulates his so-called friends for financial gain. In other words he doesn't, on paper, to even come close to filling the traditional role of a television protagonist. The typical, unwavering devotion with which most shows traditionally portrayed their protagonists was supposedly nowhere to be found—a testament to a new generation of shows interested in characters that transcended formulaic types that had long been considered banal and trite. Nevertheless, regardless of Tony's blatantly immoral actions, audiences not only found him interesting but they *liked* him.

In many ways, however, this appeal of Tony Soprano is perfectly understandable. From the very beginnings of the show, there are multiple rhetorical tactics at work that support the likeability of Tony, especially with regards to a contemporary American male audience. First, I am going to discuss the ways in which the narrative of *The Sopranos* engages in a rhetoric of masculinity that support Tony's likeability. In doing so, I will focus on the rhetoric of merit, on how Tony is immensely good at what he does, better than anyone else in the show as he demonstrates ample amounts of intelligence and cunning. Second, as another method the show uses to support Tony's likeability, I will focus on the rhetoric of masculinity that is manifested in Tony's physical strength and sex appeal; this is interesting especially with regards to



ways in which his character is appealing for the contemporary male experiencing a sense of lost masculinity in an increasingly postindustrial world. Third, I want to focus on the rhetoric of progressiveness: Tony, even as he is apart of a subculture steeped in traditionalism, respects the validity of progressiveness, evident most poignantly in his seeing a psychiatrist, a serious taboo in the mobster community.

After this, I will consider the different moralizing perspectives of *The Sopranos*—how commentators have argued that the show intentionally builds up a fascination with and admiration for Tony’s character in an effort to undercut this appeal, creating a moral quandary in viewers as they’re led to question the relationship between charisma and moral judgments. The question, therefore, for the purpose of this chapter, is to ask whether or not this goal is accomplished and, also, whether the show deals with this issue in a serious manner. I will not, however, make claims about the morality of creating or watching such a show, as I instead want to focus on the ways in which traditions of American individualism are maintained and modified to appeal to a contemporary intellectual audience through the individual of Tony Soprano. The purpose of examining the moral question, then, is solely to question the show’s approach to Tony; that is, does the show want us to stay sympathetic with his character as the show progresses, or does it seriously want us to have pause, considering how we could have ever approved of such an amoral, sadistic protagonist in the first place? Ultimately, with regards to the overall effort of this thesis, I will then turn to the

question of what this may mean about the ways in which shows such as *The Sopranos*, under the guise of moral seriousness, favor the status of the individual over and against that of the social

### *Merit and Masculinity*

With regards to Tony's merit, it is helpful to consider Tony in contrast to others in the show who are also in the mob business, especially those in leadership positions. At the beginning of the first season Tony is convincingly portrayed as more in-control, poised, and intelligent than the rest of the members of the DiMeo crime family. When acting boss Jackie Aprile Sr. dies from cancer within the first few episodes, Tony's uncle, Junior, eventually assumes control of the family, even as it is apparent that Tony would be a more natural leader. The reason is that Junior, unlike Tony, is enamored with the status of boss, a characteristic that clouds his judgment. Tony, on the other hand, essentially controls the family behind his uncle's back, focusing on practical matters above the title he holds; he does not do so out of malice for Junior, he's simply a pragmatist. So it seems from the very beginning that Tony *deserves* to be on top, enacting a rhetorical appeal to the value of merit: the concept that one (ideally) gets what one deserves through hard work. In this case, this ideology manifests itself in a culturally-inclined sympathy for the best man for the job. This would be especially appealing to an audience that values Tony's traits of perception and intellect: as Adam Kostko points out in his book *Why We Love Sociopaths*, Tony's story represents an aspect

of meritocracy, the rhetoric of upward mobility, which is appealing for a predominantly upwardly mobile, upper-middle class audience (47). The show promotes this effect of Tony partly through his merit relative to other characters and also through his ability to accomplish his goals.

This is very closely related to the masculinity of Tony, which viewers see firstly through his imposing physical build; while Tony does not work out, and is not necessarily in good shape (declining as the seasons go on) he contains a natural, practical strength. For example, in the pilot episode, Tony and his cousin Christopher (whom he affectionately refers to as his nephew) are driving to a meeting when they see a man who owes them money walking with a young woman. Tony tells Chris to drive toward him, and, once they reach him, Chris jumps out of the car to physically assault the man. However, Chris humorously takes a knee to the groin, leaving Tony to take care of the man himself. Sliding into the driver's seat of the car, he steers it onto a sidewalk, and then, once he's got the debtor in his grasp, proceeds to swiftly and authoritatively beat the man in front of a growing crowd of shocked passersby. Tony's physical strength serves to illustrate his ability to take matters into his own hands, which he proceeds to willingly get dirty with far more ease than Chris.

While the instance with Chris was a bit over-the-top, there are some scenes in which the physical masculinity of Tony is taken to an absurd level. For example, a couple of assassins are hired by Junior to kill Tony in episode 12 of the first season, a

call Junior makes out of pride when he finds out that Tony has been making deals behind his back. As the first assassin approaches Tony is getting into his SUV after buying a newspaper and a bottle of orange juice, and Tony sees the man approaching in the reflection of a window, gun pointing squarely at him, only yards away. However, his first shot misses, shattering the bottle Tony is holding. Recovering from his initial shock, he hurries to get into the driver's seat, which he manages to do. The assassin then runs up to the now-shattered driver's side window and, once again, poorly manages the attempt, placing the gun easily within Tony's reach; Tony grabs the gun, wrestling with the assassin for control. The other assassin, who has been waiting in the car, hurries to the other side of Tony's SUV, and, also not known for his marksmanship, shoots his partner instead of Tony. After he recovers from brief shock over killing the wrong man, he takes his aim once again at Tony, who easily reaches his right hand to the other side of the vehicle and grabs the man's gun (which this assassin has also conveniently placed within Tony's arm's reach) pointing it away from him. With his left hand, then, he begins to drive. While getting up to speed, the assassin fearfully hanging on to the side of the SUV, Tony pries the gun from the man's hand, forcing him to let go of the SUV. This scene—absurd as it is—may be Tony's best *Commando* moment, relying not only on his own outstanding wrist strength, but on the bungling stupidity (and poor aim, wrist strength) of the assassins. As with the scene with Christopher, this scene

serves to reiterate not only Tony's physical strength, but also how much more control and physical authority he has compared to other characters.

And yet, as if anticipating an audience being overwhelmed by the absurdity of the scene, Tony, who begins excitedly laughing from his conquest, loses control of his vehicle and slams into a parked car, and is knocked unconscious. He earns a trip to the emergency room where he gets a part of his ear (which was hit by a bullet) sown back on. With this humorous turn, the show maintains the physical strength of Tony without appearing too unrealistic. After all, as will be a common theme throughout this essay, the verisimilitude of *The Sopranos* is immensely important for a show that markets itself toward a sophisticated audience—an audience critically aware of unrealistic and manipulative depictions of masculinity in film and television. Nevertheless, this touch of reality does not seem to harm the masculine depiction of Tony; if anything, it serves merely to represent a sort of comedic moment, allowing the audience to accept the ridiculous scenario that came before, which, ultimately, still functions to portray Tony as hyper-masculine.

Additionally, the portrayal of Tony's masculinity, although certainly a trope, may be especially poignant for an American male audience who has, as of late, experienced a sort of masculinity crisis. As Hanna Rosin argues in her *Atlantic* article "The End of Men," there have historically been certain ideas about what it means to be a man, and how those roles are enacted, such as through physical strength. Of course,

these ideas about men are not merely biological; Rosin, in fact, argues that they probably have more to do with social roles “based on what was more efficient throughout a long era of human history.” The masculine ideal of American male life may seem, to some, as having been robbed of its essence, upended by an economy that no longer finds the norm to be useful for much more than selling beer and movie tickets—that is, useful as a rhetorical appeal, targeting men who yearn for a more adventurous lifestyle. Tony echoes this sentiment himself in the pilot episode, during a therapy session with Dr. Melfi:

Let me tell ya something. Nowadays, everybody's gotta go to shrinks, and counselors, and go on "Sally Jessy Raphael" and talk about their problems. What happened to Gary Cooper? The strong, silent type. That was an American. He wasn't in touch with his feelings. He just did what he had to do.

Ironically here, Tony points to a movie star—an actor—as the basis for the masculine American male. Surely, these roles have been strongly reinforced in the past in American films (think of almost any Sylvester Stallone or Schwarzenegger film, as well as, yes, Gary Cooper) and television series, in addition to advertising, and Tony could arguably be seen as yet another reinforcement of this gender norm. Ultimately, his physical strength is a very visual means of depicting the general merit of the individual of Tony Soprano, as if he were too powerful/worthy an individual to die by the hands of petty assassins, glorified above and beyond ordinary man.

Women are also portrayed as being affected by the strength of Tony's character, and this aspect of his character is also especially appealing to male viewers with fantasies of sexual freedom and prowess—another rhetorically-enforced aspect of the strong individual. The hang-out spot for many of the members of the DiMeo family is Bada Bing, a strip club owned by one of Tony's business associates, Silvio Dante. The strippers are often portrayed as being enamored with Tony; for example, in a late episode from the sixth season, "Cold Stones," one of them performs fellatio on him while he drives her home; when he offers her money, she tells him that it isn't necessary (though she takes the money anyway). This depiction resonates with the specific male sexual fantasy of free, inconsequential sex with experienced women. By depicting Tony as a man able to receive this kind of attention, the show further supports the audience's perception of Tony as powerful over women.

However, Tony does not only live out his (and many viewing males') sexual fantasies with prostitutes. *The Sopranos* also depicts Tony as also having interest in and receiving interest from powerful, sophisticated women. Consider "Commendatori" from the second season, in which Tony doesn't sleep with Annalisa, the daughter of an Italian mob boss. Tony, along with Chris and a couple of other members of the mob, travel to Italy in an attempt to build up a relationship with an Italian mob family that Tony is distantly related to. However, once the family arrives at dinner with members of the Italian mob family, the acting boss that they have heard so much about is in fact

mostly unable to perform his job anymore because of his age and declining health, leaving Annalisa in charge. Annalisa is thoroughly capable of doing the job, on top of being a very beautiful (and sexualized) woman. She is, however, herself not beyond Tony's sexual power. By the end of the episode, she attempts to seduce Tony. Tony, however, rejects the advances, saying that, while he does want to have sex with her, he doesn't, in his words, shit where he eats. In this scene, he embodies the kind of man who can attract even the strongest of women, and still possesses the self control not to make impulsive decisions. Although he is a free, sexually powerful man, he is neither reckless nor impulsive. In this depiction, the audience can appreciate Tony's sexual power and respect his sensible business approach simultaneously.<sup>2</sup>

### *The Progressive Mobster*

Tony's appeal is not merely his pragmatics. Through a myriad of narrative and cinematic methods, the show conveys him as moral relative to other characters in the show. For example, when other characters in the show abuse women, Tony is appalled, even as he sees little problem with infidelity; in this contradiction, Tony seems all the more admirable as he is constructed as being better than his friends. His progressiveness is most poignantly illustrated, however, through Tony's seeing a

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<sup>2</sup> Consider, alternatively, how less powerful he would seem if he had said no to Annalisa because of devotion to his wife. Instead, Tony appeals to his business-first mentality for the reason behind his denial, which maintains his control over the situation—he is not saying no out of any obligation to another human, but only out of his own desire to successfully lead the DiMeo mob family.



psychiatrist for his panic attacks. Before *The Sopranos*, mob figures in film had never appeared so conflicted: one could never imagine Tony Montana or Vito Corleone seeing a psychiatrist or seeking help for a weakness, especially a psychological one. Tony, on the other hand, while aware of the stigma for a mobster (much less mob boss) seeking such help, is enlightened enough to see the potential benefit of it.

This aspect of the plot, the psychotherapy, is no small part of the show; it is, in fact, how it begins. The pilot episode opens with Tony sitting in the lobby outside Dr. Melfi's office, staring intently at a nude statuette, the camera switching back and forth between zooming in on Tony and the statuette's faces, demonstrating Tony's curiosity (and yet hesitancy) concerning art. The reason he's there is because he passed out, and his physician thought that it was a panic attack, sending him to a psychiatrist after an MRI scan showed nothing wrong physically. After asking what business he's in (waste management, he says), Dr. Melfi asks Tony if he has any idea why he passed out.

Tony: I don't know. The morning I got sick, I'd been thinking: It's good to be in something from the ground floor. I came too late for that; I know. But lately, I'm getting the feeling that I came in at the end. The best is over.

Dr. Melfi: Many Americans, I think, feel that way.

Tony: I think about my father. He never reached the heights like me. But in a lot of ways he had it better. He had his people. They had their standards. They had pride. Today, what do we got?

As Tony says this line, the camera, which has switched to a flashback of Tony during the morning of the panic attack, depicts him leafing through the morning newspaper that he has just picked up in the driveway; the headline reads: “Clinton Warns Medicare Could Be Bust In Yr 2000.” In these sort of instances of the show, this being the first, Tony is presented as relatable both in that he has middle-class concerns, and in that he feels a certain nostalgia for a simpler past—a nostalgia he explains while speaking with a psychiatrist, which is an obvious contradiction. Tony both participates in the what has made the past the present and complains about how it is no longer the past. It’s partly these contradictions that make him especially interesting for an audience that similarly experiences dissonance, probably also with regards to the complexity and difficulty of a present in America that has become increasingly more difficult to navigate and understand. Also, however, the fact that the show represents an intellectual take on a mob boss, presenting *itself* as analytical and progressive, serves to make it more appealing. Thus, the show can be both exciting, with its narrative focused on a New Jersey mob boss, but it can also be intellectual in its perspective.

Interestingly, the show does not portray Tony’s seeing a therapist as conflicting with his masculinity. He does not, after all, seek out professional psychological help. He is portrayed more so as a victim of a complex, contemporary world than a willing participant. In the opening scene from the pilot, Dr. Melfi asks if he had experienced his feelings of frustration with the waning of traditional masculinity in contemporary

America. Tony initially replies that he doesn't know, attempting to shrug off the analysis, but then he explains how, a couple of months prior, two ducks landed in his pool and mated, having some ducklings. The camera, at this point, shows Tony giddily feeding the ducks in the pool, walking into the water in his robe to be able to toss pieces of bread closer in their direction. Tony continues discussing the morning, enigmatically recounting stories of some of his mob-related activities, the audience being afforded an insider's view of these events while Tony's narration, for part of the time, remains. Tony describes the panic attack that led him to a psychiatrist: while cooking some food in his back yard, with friends over for his son's birthday, Tony watches the now-grown up ducklings, along with their parents, fly away. The panic attack ensues, and he drops a canister of lighter fluid on the fire, causing an explosion while he lies unconscious on the grass.

Later in the episode, as the narrative shifts back to the overarching scene with Dr. Melfi, Tony admits to feeling depressed, as well—ever since the ducks left. Even though he leaves when Dr. Melfi pushes this line of questioning, looking panicked, he comes back later in the same episode to discuss his troubles with his mother, a popular theme in the first couple of seasons of the show. Dr. Melfi prescribes Prozac for him, which—while feigning reluctance—he accepts. Tony's willingness to take part in the psychotherapy causes him to be seen as vulnerable and sympathetic. Not only that, but

he's also seen as iconoclastic and strongly individualistic, being that he's willing to act against the traditional mobster taboo of not, under any condition, seeing a psychiatrist.

*And Then He Kills That Guy...*

At this point, the fact that *The Sopranos* wants an American audience to be not only sympathetic but admiring of Tony Soprano does not seem debatable. On top of being strong and in-control, he is also portrayed as struggling through contemporary social changes—a “real” human being, one might even argue. And, were it so simple, the show would likely be seen as merely another extension of shows that explore masculine bravado, even with its focus on the difficulty of modern American life. To be sure, the show has been taken seriously in intellectual and artistic circles: the first two seasons were screened at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, unprecedented in television history; Norman Mailer expressed his respect for the show, seeing it as respectable replacement of the Great American Novel (Hammond); and Brett Martin, in his book *Difficult Men*, adds to the literary comparisons, describing Tony as a “direct descendant of Updike’s Rabbit Angstrom” (84). Additionally, the show—especially with regards to Tony’s character—has been written about and debated in academic journals, such as *The Journals of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, and philosophers such as Noël Carroll and A.W. Eaton have offered their perspectives on the moral message of the show. The general argument centers around how, as the show goes on,

unadulterated support for Tony is challenged by his blatantly immoral actions, presenting a moral quandary in viewers.

The moment that seems most important with regards to this moral tension comes chronologically rather early in the show, with the fifth episode of the first season, "College." Tony is on a college tour with his daughter, Meadow, when he sees a man that he thinks he recognizes as Fabian Petrulio, a man who had entered the Witness Protection Program after ratting out members of the DiMeo family to the FBI, since he had been arrested for selling drugs. After Tony confirms his identity by recognizing a Ronald Reagan bust in Petrulio's travel agency office, similar to the ones he had made while in prison, he gets in touch with Christopher, who insists on coming to Maine to make the hit. Tony declines; he says that he will take care of Petrulio, which he does, strangling him from behind with a piece of electrical wire for a full minute and sixteen seconds (about as long as it would take in real life, the audience must suppose), a testament to his physical strength. While the show up to this point does not shy away from the consequences of Tony's profession, with moments such as the above-mentioned beating he gives to a debtor in the pilot episode, it had not shown Tony actually killing anyone. But the camera does not flinch, zooming in on the two men's faces, Tony intense and determined, Petrulio gasping for breath.

It is this moment that many commentators point to as the first moment that the show really became a morally challenging show, beyond anything ever seen on

television before. Before this, it was essentially unheard of for a television protagonist to murder someone, much less so violently, so willingly. As Martin notes, “What remains shocking in ‘College’ isn’t the death itself; it’s Tony’s unmitigated relish in doing the deed” (91). The general critical idea about this scene, then, is that it morally challenges viewers: they must consider the dissonance between how they feel about Tony and what he has done. Margrethe Bruun Vaage, a film professor at the University of Kent, calls this moment one of the show’s “reality checks,” which she defines as “that which occurs when something in a fiction reminds the spectator of the moral and political consequences his or her emotional engagement would have, were the fictional events real” (220). She argues that, generally speaking, individuals interact differently—morally and emotionally—with fiction than they do with real life; the fact that we *know* something to be fiction mitigates the obligation of making a moral judgment. Therefore, she sees moments such as Petrulio’s murder, “reality checks,” as forcing viewers to seriously consider the morality of an individual, in this case that of Tony. Noël Carroll would agree with this, though he makes grander claims about the morality of the show than Vaage. He sees these moments as warnings to the “complacent viewer who might have turned a blind eye to Tony’s crimes” (372). Thus, he sees in the show a moral sophistication, causing us to consider the difference between likeability and morality: “In fact, inviting us to recollect this serves morality by putting us on guard against the

seductiveness of bad guys with (nonmorally) attractive traits, like Tony and, for that matter, Humbert Humbert”<sup>3</sup> (373).

However, like A.W. Eaton’s response to Carroll’s argument, I do not see these “reality checks” as being so clearly opposed to Tony’s actions. Eaton asks if we, the audience, can “in actual practice keep our nonmoral approbation and our moral disapprobation in airtight compartments so as to prevent the former from infecting the later?” (376). To this question, her answer is a definitive no, which she argues convincingly: “It is a widespread feature of human psychology,” she argues, “that when forming attitudes about other people, our assessments—including our moral assessments—are often unconsciously contaminated by the influence of positive responses to unrelated attributes” (377). As an example, she discusses a scene from the episode “Second Coming” in the final sixth season of the show, in which Tony “curb stomps” a man that has made “harassing, lewd remarks to Tony’s daughter.” This places the the audience in a conundrum: while we may not ourselves curb stomp someone who has committed a serious offense against us or our family, much less argue for the rectitude of the action, it is difficult to blame Tony for doing so, since, after all, his motivation for doing so is pure—he wants to protect his daughter’s honor. Hence, “We cannot cleanly extract the admirable dimension of this action—protecting his

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<sup>3</sup> Note the literary reference.

daughter—from the vicious—drastically and permanently maiming Coco’s face,” Eaton concludes.

The same, I argue, could be said of the infamous “College” scene. It is certainly true that by the time Tony commits the murder, the audience has come to understand the importance of trust in Tony’s world; after all, if those who are arrested make a deal with the FBI and turn informant, the mob would quickly be snuffed out. Thus, those who have spent time in prison, refusing to talk, are treated with deep respect upon returning home; conversely, those who do make a deal with the FBI are viewed as reprehensible, even deserving of death, a powerful motivator for keeping one’s lips sealed. (One could even begin to delineate the use of rhetoric in the mob.) On top of this, Petruccio is not a character that the audience has any sympathy for; if anything, we would be naturally inclined to dislike him, since we have grown to like Tony, and he is presented as an adversary. But additionally, Petruccio, once we are given more detail about him, seems no better—almost certainly worse, in fact—than Tony. He has been kicked out of the Witness Protection Program, and is selling drugs in the town, a fact that destroys any argument that he sold out to the FBI for admirable reasons. Instead, he seems simply to have less integrity and devotion to his friends, ratting them out to save his own skin. Additionally, Petruccio attempts to hire a couple of men to kill both Tony and his daughter. When this doesn’t work out, he almost does so himself, tracking down the place where Tony is staying and, as Tony and his daughter return to the hotel



(Meadow drunk), almost kills them both with a silenced pistol. However, at the last moment he decides not to, since there are a couple of elderly bystanders. Therefore, the audience's sympathies are not that severely challenged by Tony's murder of Petruccio. In fact, they may even be reinforced, Tony once again displaying not only his physical prowess, but his desire to protect his family—and, considering that the man that he is killed is no better than he, he seems similar to Dexter's character in Showtime's *Dexter*, killing only those whom the audience regards less sympathetically.<sup>4</sup>

Another scene that could be pointed to in defense of the moral complexity of the show is Tony's killing of Christopher in the episode "Kennedy and Heidi" from the sixth season. Chris was a staple character of the show from the very beginning, though not an uncomplicated one; at times, he struggles with drug addiction, and is often distracted, sometimes seeming as if he wants to get out of the mob business. Nevertheless, he is mostly a likeable character, and Tony holds deep affection for him, grooming him for the boss position after he is gone. Thus, it could initially seem deplorable that Tony would kill him. Nevertheless, a closer look at the context of this occurrence reveals that even this is muddled by complexity. The night Chris is murdered, he and Tony are driving back from a meeting with the acting boss of the

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<sup>4</sup> Consider the alternative, if Tony were to kill a mobster turned informant who did so because he saw the immorality of his ways, repented, and attempted to rebuild his life, only to be found and killed by Tony years later. That would be a tragedy and the audience would understand that—this could quite possibly stifle our sympathy with Tony, were the show to ever offer such a scenario, which it does not.

New York-based Lupertazzi crime family. While driving, Christopher is clearly agitated, fidgeting with his stereo system, and Tony eyes him suspiciously—it is expected that he has relapsed and is using heroin again. At one point, when trying to turn down the music after Tony asks him a question, Chris veers onto the wrong side of the road, almost hitting another car driven by a couple of young girls (after whom the episode is named, Kennedy and Heidi), and, attempting to regain control of his Escalade, veers the vehicle off the road, violently crashing, rolling multiple times down an embankment. Tony, who was wearing a seatbelt, isn't hurt badly, but Chris, who wasn't wearing a seatbelt, is severely injured. After the dust settles he tells Tony not to call the police because he'll never pass a drug test. Tony looks in the back seat and sees Chris' daughter's car seat impaled with a tree branch. Tony exits the truck and limps his way over to Chris' door where Chris reiterates that he will never pass a drug test, asking Tony to call him a taxi; at this point, he's struggling to breath and begins spitting up blood. Tony begins to dial 911, but closes his phone, and lightly grasps Chris' nose, suffocating him. As he does so, the camera once again shifts to the car seat, and, after Chris is dead, Tony calls the ambulance.

This scene is difficult to watch: once Chris realizes what Tony is doing, his eyes begin to shift back and forth as he tries to breath through his mouth. However, while the audience may be sympathetic with Chris, it is understandable why Tony kills him—the good intent behind the murder. The impaled car seat implies that Tony is concerned

about what effect Chris' recklessness may have on his family; the show makes it perfectly clear that Tony is considering the future of Chris' family. Also, his hesitation to call the police is justifiable enough: Chris has often been a loose canon, and Tony may be worried that Chris would sooner or later turn FBI informant, just as his ex-girlfriend Adriana did. In addition, Tony almost died himself just moments ago from Chris' driving while high. Thus, even as the audience is surely saddened by this, they would not respond with disgust for Tony; sympathizing with him does not take far-reaching justifications, as the show provides the audience plenty of reasons to side with Tony. On top of this, Tony is sincerely distraught about what has happened—he can never fully talk to anyone about his feelings. The implication is that, while the audience liked Christopher, Tony loved him and he didn't make the decision lightly, and only did so when he was convinced it was the best way of handling the situation.

The show's supposed "reality checks" are not brought on solely by Tony's murderous actions. For example, Carroll points to a conversation Tony's wife, Carmela, has with a therapist, Dr. Krakower, in an episode from the third season aptly titled "Second Opinion." Carmela and Tony had attended a couple of sessions with Dr. Melfi to discuss marital problems, and, when Carmela shows up to a session but Tony is absent, she expresses the guilt she feels for Tony's occupation. Dr. Melfi recommends that she see Dr. Krakower, a colleague, to avoid conflicting interests if she wants to see a therapist regularly. The scene with Dr. Krakower begins *in medias res*, Carmela wiping

tears from her eyes with a tissue. She attempts to excuse Tony, saying that everyone's marriage has problems. Krakower asks if he's seeing a nothing woman, Carmela answers, "You could make that plural; yes he sees other women." She says that she tries to look the other way, that she wants to help him, and then tries to explain to Krakower, who's Jewish, that, in Catholicism (the Sopranos are Catholic), divorce is not an option. When Krakower denies this excuse, she attempts other methods of explanation.

Carmela: He's a good man. He's a good father.  
 Krakower: You tell me he's a depressed criminal, prone to anger, serially unfaithful. Is that your definition of a good man?...

Carmela: I thought psychiatrists weren't supposed to be judgmental.  
 Krakower: Many patients want to be excused for their current predicament because of events that occurred in their childhood. That's what psychiatry has become in America. Visit any shopping mall or ethnic pride parade to witness the results.

Carmela: What we say in here, stays in here, right?  
 Krakower: By ethical code, and by law.

Carmela: His crimes... they are, uh, organized crime.  
 Krakower: The Mafia.

Carmela: Oh, Jesus! (She wipes tears from her eyes). So what? So what? He betrays me every week with these whores.  
 Krakower: Probably the least of his misdeeds.  
 [Carmela seems overwhelmed, gets up to leave]

Krakower: You can leave now, or you can stay and hear what I have to say.  
 Carmela: You're gonna charge the same anyway.  
 Krakower: I won't take your money.  
 Carmela: That's a new one.  
 Krakower: You must trust your initial impulse and consider leaving him. You'll never be able to feel good about yourself. You'll never be able to quell the feelings of guilt and shame that you talked about, as long as you're his accomplice.

[Carmela shakes her head in agreement]

Carmela: You're wrong about the accomplice part, though.

Krakower: You sure?

Carmela: All I did was make sure he's got clean clothes in his closet and dinner on his table.

Krakower: So enabler would be a more accurate job description for you than accomplice. My apologies.

Carmela: So, you think I need to, uh, define my boundaries more clearly, keep a certain distance, not internalize my...

Krakower: (interrupting her) What did I just say?

Carmela: Leave him.

Krakower: Take only the children—what's left of them—and go.

Carmela: My priest said I should try and work with him, help him to be a better man.

Krakower: How's that going?

Carmela: I...

Krakower: Have you ever read *Crime and Punishment*? Dostoevsky? It's not an easy read. It's about guilt and redemption. And I think for your husband to turn himself in, read this book, and reflect on his crimes every day for seven years, in his cell, then he might be redeemed.

Carmela: I would have to get a lawyer, find an apartment, arrange for child support...

Krakower: You're not listening. I'm not charging you because I won't take blood money, and you can't either. One thing you can never say is that you haven't been told.

Carmela: I see. You're right, I see.

This scene arguably does a better job than any other in the show at pushing the audience toward seriously considering Tony's morality (and Carmela's, for that matter). Tony's therapy with Dr. Melfi is, as Carmela suggests, not judgmental, a take on contemporary psychotherapy, and therefore Krakower's perspective (even if prejudiced

and reductive) is refreshing compared to the psychological complexity the show is typically steeped in—a contemporary real world, even, that often seems frustratingly steeped in such moral relativity. And, were this to be the final scene of an, it would be difficult to argue that it doesn't provide a legitimate reality check.

However, the way that this episode ends brings into question the seriousness of this reality check, as well. After the scene with Krakower ends, there is a quick scene with Junior, and then the show's final scene begins, in which Tony comes home to find Carmela lying on the couch, strange for her as she is usually busying herself. Tony asks if she's depressed and suggests that maybe she see a therapist by herself. She shrugs this off, and then remarks that she told Columbia University, where Meadow is attending, that she would donate \$50,000 to the school. Tony and her had argued over this previously: \$50,000 was what the school had asked for, but Tony stubbornly offered only \$5,000 when Carmela told him. When Tony replies that, while he may be willing to give an extra five or ten thousand on top of the initial five that he offered, he wouldn't give the full fifty. Carmela rolls over on the couch and tells him that he has to do something nice for her today. Tony acquiesces, as emotive guitar music begins to fade in; the music gets louder as Tony says that she could probably use a break from cooking and asks her to go out to dinner with him. She gets up from the couch, wrapped in her blanket, and they head upstairs, presumably to get dressed for dinner. This represents the ways in which *narrative proximity* affects the audience, the term used for the concept

that audiences sympathize more easily with characters who are portrayed as protagonists, an effect certainly caused in part by learned cinematic cues (such as the emotional guitar music) but also by the narrative portrayal of a character as relatable and human. In this scene, the “final word” is given to Tony, not Dr. Krakower; this is, after all, Tony’s show, and Tony is never removed from his role as protagonist.

So while these scenes at the end of this episode are especially affecting,<sup>5</sup> just as with the scene with Christopher, one must wonder if the serious moral concerns of Krakower are legitimately intended to stick for the audience. It’s difficult not to smile in approval as the music starts playing, and Tony—strangely, one may argue—agrees to give the large amount of money to Columbia University, which he had vehemently refused to allow previously. It is apparent that, through these biased narrative points, the show is more interested in maintaining audience sympathy for its protagonist than in persisting with these serious questions. In a way, even, it seems that the audience’s reaction to the Krakower scene may parallel Carmela’s: while he may be right, serious change would be laborious, and everything is easy and, for the most part, enjoyable as is—even if indulgent. Not to pull the Shakespeare card, but consider as a contrast the way in which Shakespeare handles the audience’s response to Richard III in the play named after him. Initially, Richard is clearly the protagonist, and the audience is given an insider’s look into his life and character, as well as the motivations for his immoral

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<sup>5</sup> Edie Falco, the actress who plays Carmela, won her second Emmy for “Best Actress in a Drama” for her performance in this episode.

actions. However, Shakespeare does something that *The Sopranos* never does: he allows for the narrative proximity with Richard to be broken, as the “lens” shifts to other characters, some of whom experience first-hand the terrible consequences of Richard’s actions. The audience is thereby led to question their initial sympathy for Richard, especially with regards to the relationship between charisma and morality.<sup>6</sup> *The Sopranos*, however, always portrays Tony through a sympathetic lens, and the viewers—who one might suppose are making subjective judgments of Tony—have, in fact, little choice but to sympathize with him.<sup>7</sup> In many ways it functions similarly to television commercials: even as one may be aware of the manipulative nature of a commercial, the associations one makes with the message of a commercial and the brand it represents are often subconscious, a function of an individual’s peripheral processing, playing off of cultural messages that it both enacts and maintains. In the same way, *The Sopranos* not only plays on the previously-mentioned rhetorical techniques to cultivate sympathy for Tony, but they also rely on cinematic cues and departures from realism to help do so, as well.

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<sup>6</sup> Additionally, Richard becomes increasingly agitated and much of the initial glitz of his character disappears—something else that *The Sopranos* never does, in actuality, with Tony.

<sup>7</sup> Similar to the example of Richard III, Eaton uses Hitchcock’s movie to illustrate another way that the audience could be seriously challenged to consider their responses to immoral characters: after a character commits a serious act of rape and strangulation that the camera depicts, the perpetrator later re-enters the same building to once again commit the crime—this time, however, the camera pulls away, which the audience is supposed to feel morbidly disappointed for, causing them to consider their sadistic fascination with the depiction of violent event.



### *The Modification of American Individualism*

The purpose of the “reality checks” in *The Sopranos* may then be argued as enacting a modification of the traditional, masculine image of the American self-made man, in all of his strength, resolve, resourcefulness, sex appeal, and pragmatism. And, while the show maintains this image of hyper-masculinized individuality with Tony, it also makes his character more accessible for a contemporary audience bored with a camera known for turning away from the misdeeds of a protagonist. Instead of causing the show to be more challenging, then, these moments, dubbed “reality checks,” actually make the show more digestible, more entertaining, thrilling, believable, and watchable. Consider David Chase’s comment on the inclusion of Tony’s murder in the “College” episode: while then-HBO director Chris Albrecht was immensely concerned that portraying the murder, especially in such a violent way, would cause the audience to lose sympathy with Tony, Chase argued that they would lose the audience if they *didn’t* include it (Martin, 92). Therefore the show, in its willingness to portray the “reality” of its lead character, helps further its verisimilitude, making it especially convincing and watchable for a high-brow audience. This works in conjunction with all of the show’s efforts to create sympathy for Tony, efforts that are never, in actuality, undercut by any deeper moral concern. So, while some may *perceive* a certain moral questioning in the show, it does not, in fact, promote such a moral contemplation—in fact, when challenged, the moral question of the show is surprisingly non-existent. *The*

*Sopranos* doesn't want the audience to dislike Tony, which would mean the dislike of the show; hence, while it may toy with moral depth, the show's real success is created by the ways it tapped into an ideological nuance in America—about the way we think about individuals; especially in the twenty-first century, where we find the complex, the questionably moral, and the troubled genius to be our individualist archetype.

Of course, if the film lacks ethical depth that doesn't mean that it is necessarily harmful, poor, or not worth watching. Eaton, at the end of her response article to Carroll, contends that while the show does lack a moralistic message, it does enact a positive aesthetical affect. In Carroll's words, "a moral minus equals an aesthetic plus." Eaton ends her essay with the following:

On my account, RHWs<sup>8</sup> keep us awake at night as we wrestle with our own deep ambivalence. We return to the work again and again for resolution but are always denied, left to linger in a protracted state of psychic disunity that is, like Immanuel Kant's sublime, both painful and—as anyone who has ever fallen in love with Humbert Humbert or Tony Soprano or Omar Little or Gustavo Fring knows—deliciously disturbing and compelling. (379)

If this account of watching the show is universally true, then it would seem that watching *The Sopranos* is actually an immensely valuable and artistic experience.

Nevertheless, it seems wroth asking if the aesthetic and the moral are, in actuality, so far

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<sup>8</sup> Rough Hero Works—a term Eaton uses as a catch-all for the new wave of shows, starting with *The Sopranos*, that represent nontraditional, morally compromised protagonists.

apart. As I mentioned, it is beyond the scope of this thesis to focus closely on whether or not these shows are genuinely artistic. However, it does seem questionable that an antihero that garners such deep ambivalence should end up on t-shirts, coffee mugs, posters, and a wide variety of other fan paraphernalia. The type of cultural response that *The Sopranos* has received indicates not an audience that is ambivalent and restless because of the moral complexity of its lead, but instead an audience that admires Tony and the world he lives in: individualistic, dramatic, and free from collective concern.

## Chapter 2

### Intellectualized Masculinity

*I have spent my whole life scared—frightened of things that could happen, might happen, might not happen. Fifty years I spent like that. Finding myself awake at three in the morning. But you know what? Ever since my diagnosis, I sleep just fine... What I came to realize is that fear, that's the worst of it. That's the real enemy. So, get up, get out in the real world and you kick that bastard as hard as you can right in the teeth.*

- Walter White

*The Sopranos* went to great lengths to be a relevant television show. There is the appropriate psychoanalysis, the complicated post-racism, issues of feminism and relating questions of masculinity in postindustrial American life. However, since Tony Soprano is and has always been a gangster, his life worlds different from the rest of ours, the show's capacity for relevance to typical contemporary American life has its limits. This is not so much the case, however, with Walter White from *Breaking Bad*. While "Walt" is certainly extremely intelligent (having won a Nobel Prize in chemistry), and yet his life is meant to be perceived as relevant and understandable in many ways. In the first episode of the show, many contemporary cultural problems are addressed through the current state of Walt's life. He feels underappreciated and insignificant, working two jobs, one of which is a low position at a car wash. In all, his life is monotonous and mostly uneventful. Additionally, his wife essentially dominates their relationship, and other men see him as weak and boring. In fact, this seems to certainly be the case for Walt, that is his life is insignificant and unremarkable, as he stands in as

an exaggerative portrayal of a man indifferent and apathetic in postindustrial America. He does not hate life, per se—he's just doesn't particularly care for his own.

The cause of Walt's malaise could be seen as societal issues as well as simply his own timidity. That is, while he has certainly been affected by the difficult economic situation in America (the show premiered in 2008, at the time of the Financial Crisis), he is also portrayed as personally responsible for his current life. He had a hand in creating a company that, later in the show, is worth 2 billion dollars, but he sold his portion away when he was young, a deal he made just \$5,000. However, regardless of what got him there, what gets him out is undoubtedly his own effort and ability. When he finds out that he has cancer, he realizes that his life may soon be over, and he hasn't been living it fully whatsoever, stuck in his complacency and mundaneness. He is offered help with his medical bills, is even offered a great position at the company that he helped found, but he turns it all down and decides to cook methamphetamines instead.

Like *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad* finds its drama in the narrative of a man who is opposed to the government, causes harms to others, and does it all with gravitas. Hence, like Tony Soprano, Walt is an extraordinary individual who should theoretically be considered immoral, since he obstructs the well-being of others. The show does not condone Walt's actions but it does not reject them or judge them, either. In this way, it functions very similarly to *The Sopranos*. The protagonist is an anti-social, morally problematic anti-hero, and the narrative is filtered almost entirely through his

perspective. Therefore, the audience is not afforded a look into the lives of those whom Walt has affected and, if they are, then, as with *The Sopranos*, they are just as morally compromised as Walt. Not only that, but due to the narrative's proximity to Walt, other characters never garner anywhere near the same amount of pathos as Walt. As with Tony Soprano, Walt's story is told from a limited perspective that allows an audience to vicariously indulge in the triumph of the strong, self-made man.

With this chapter, then, I am going to treat *Breaking Bad* and its protagonist similarly to how I analyzed *The Sopranos*, focusing on ways that Walt maintains the rhetoric of the individual while also modifying the ideology in significant ways. First, I am going to discuss the ways in which Walt's life is portrayed as apathetic in the first episode, as well as how this apathy relates to various contemporary American issues. Second, I will focus on how the emergence of Walt as a strong, masculine figure is brought about by his intellect and risk-taking, the former of which I will pay especially close attention to, since it is the primary modification of trends of individuality that the show offers. Finally, as with Tony Soprano's character, I am going to discuss the ways in which Walt's approach to success is blatantly and intentionally anti-social, in conjunction with how the narrative justifies his behavior. I will focus on how the show's perspective is limited mostly to Walt's perspective, and how Walt's immoral actions are filtered through redeemable complications. While a fictional representation cannot be considered faulty for being untrue (since, by nature, it is so), it is interesting to consider

a show that purports to be true-to-life while neglecting and ignoring not only other perspectives but also the truth about how, for example, the drug business actually works. In other words, in a work of fiction, surely, a drug business can work however the creator wants it to work, and there is nothing wrong with creating an unrealistic representation. However, it does show us how, as a culture, we prefer television narratives that focus on individual effort and success, while leaving out the societal effects of unbridled individualism.

### *The context of Walt's "Awakening"*

Unlike Tony Soprano, Walter White's story does not begin as a continuation of criminal success and power—Tony, as far as the audience knows, has always been a prominent figure of the DiMeo crime family, groomed for the boss position; the narrative of *Breaking Bad*, on the other hand, begins with the portrayal of Walt's life as not only unremarkable but less than successful, especially considering the caliber of his intellect. He is clearly a brilliant man—we see his Nobel Prize plaque for achievements in chemistry hanging from his bedroom wall as he walks on a standstill elliptical trainer in the early hours of a weekday. However, in spite of his remarkable abilities, he work as a mere high school chemistry teacher. His intelligence is further demonstrated and validated as he speaks somewhat abstractly to his high school classroom about the study of chemistry: "Chemistry is, well technically, chemistry is the study of matter. But I prefer to see it as the study of change." He demonstrates this theory through the

mixture of different chemicals with fire, providing an interesting and engaging object lesson for his students. As Walt speaks, a couple in the class sit in the back, giggling and flirting loudly. When Walt asks the boy, Chad, if there is something wrong with his chair (implying that he should move back to it), Chad drags his chair loudly across the floor, interrupting Walt's lecture, a lecture that the audience understands to be passionate and thoughtful.

Walt has also been forced to get a second job, working at a carwash, a further demonstration of his unsuccessful position in life. His boss—a seemingly stupid and uncaring man with massive eyebrows—requires that while Walt mostly work as a cashier, he does have to fill in for employees who may call in sick or simply not show up. So when his boss tells him that a coworker has quit and Walt has to fill in by hand-cleaning cars, Walt expresses frustration (saying that they have talked about it), but acquiesces. As he's working diligently on scrubbing the tires of a shiny new Mustang, the owner of the car approaches, and predictably, it's Chad, with his girlfriend. The girlfriend begins taking pictures and calling friends, saying that they will never believe who is in the process of cleaning Chad's car. Walt is humiliated, clearly and understandably. Not only can he do little to deal with Chad's disrespectful behavior in class, but now he has been denigrated to cleaning the kid's tires. Walt is not only put into a position of frustration, then, but also humiliation, causing his lack of standing and success to be a glaring fact of his life.



With respect to Walt's two jobs, the show was undoubtedly timely when it premiered in January of 2008, as America (and much of the rest of the industrialized world, for that matter) faced its worst economic crisis since The Great Depression. Many Americans were placed in difficult financial situations, forced to work more than one job, feeling disrespected and underutilized themselves. This depiction of Walt, as a struggling middle-class man, resonates in a context of economic fragility, as many people recognize themselves as intelligent and hardworking but are nonetheless undervalued and struggling. David Pierson, in his introduction to an edited collection on *Breaking Bad*, reflects on the economic context of the show:

Emerging in the depths of the Great Recession...and in a post-welfare, neoliberal state, *Breaking Bad* expresses many of the social and economic struggles of a middle and working class America where only the ruthless capitalist entrepreneurs, whether legitimate or illegitimate, are handsomely regarded and the timid often find themselves marginalized or even victimized in a winner-take-all modern society. (11)

Thus Walt, initially, is a victim of the infamous American myth of meritocracy. Unlike Tony Soprano, Walt has not received the recognition that he deserves, wishful that his personal passion and achievement would lead him to financial success. It is clear to him that ability does not lead necessarily to success, that it takes something more—namely,

his ability to transcend his timidity and become a sort of ruthless capitalist entrepreneur himself.

Beyond his career frustrations, Walt's life at home life is no more glamorous. The pilot episode portrays Walt as feeling emasculated, with his wife, Skyler, clearly playing the more dominant role in their relationship. As they eat breakfast comprised, in part, of plastic-looking veggie bacon, which Walt's son complains about but Walt eats somewhat reluctantly, his wife and son wish him a happy fiftieth birthday. Skyler tells Walt that he better be home by five from working at the car wash, saying "You get paid till five, you'll work till five." Walt agrees to do as he's told. This trend also pervades Walt and Skyler's sex life. Later that evening, Skyler, while bidding on a piece of furniture online, surprises Walt by giving him a handjob, which she calls a birthday present. The obvious implication here is that their sex life is less than robust, Walt acting taken aback when his wife attempts to perform a sexual favor for him, although an act which seems nearly obligatory. Walt has a difficult job performing (understandable, given the circumstances), and Skyler attempts to coach him through the situation, telling him to close his eyes and relax. As he begins to enjoy himself, Skyler seems to return the enthusiasm, saying "There you go, that's it, keep it up" in varying repetitions, although never taking her eyes off of her computer screen. As Walt nears climax, Skyler pulls her hand away, exclaiming that she won the bid, her ostensible interest in the sex act revealing itself instead to be excitement for her online

auction win. As opposed to a Tony Soprano figure, then, Walt's life is not portrayed as an ideal masculine figure. Not only does he not have a masculine job, but he does not have Tony's ideal masculine sex life, either, barely desiring his wife and barely being desired by her. Whereas Tony's story begins from a position of masculine success, Walt's begins from an almost-opposite position, causing viewers to vicariously experience Walt's unenviable position and setting them up to more thoroughly enjoy Walt's coming transformation.

Walt is also shown to be less masculine than other males in the show. When Walt comes home from work at the car wash he is surprised by a birthday party arranged by his wife. As his brother-in-law, Hank (Skyler's sister's husband and a DEA agent), self-aggrandizes, Walt sits quietly sipping his beer. Then, when Hank lets Walter Jr. hold his gun, Walter Jr. tells Walt to hold it as well. Walt hesitates, saying that he doesn't want to, but eventually acquiesces, remarking that it's heavy. Hank replies, "That's why they hire men," referring to his law-enforcement office. The room erupts with laughter and Walt attempts a self-deprecating smirk. Furthermore, after watching a news report on television about a meth bust, Hank says that Walt should join him for a ride-along sometime, remarking that he should "get some excitement" in his life. Walt, though curious, shrugs, obviously not all that interested.

As Walt's economic situation mirrored real experiences of Americans in contemporary American society, so does his masculinity problem mirror contemporary

American society. As Brian Faucette writes, “[T]he show...tapped into a cultural fear that America faced a crisis of conscience and a perceived crisis of masculinity” (73-74). The crisis of conscience he refers to is the sense that, like Walt, good guys often finish last in contemporary American society; the perceived crisis of masculinity means that men feel as if they are emasculated by a postindustrial, postfeminist American society. Additionally, the only men that seem masculine (such as Hank) also seem simple and not particularly intelligent.<sup>9</sup> Though it will be discussed in more depth later, it is also interesting to note in this context that Walt’s reclamation of masculinity represents that meaningful masculinity is not necessarily vapid. That is, a man, such as Walt, can be not only intelligent, but can be intelligent in a masculine manner, representing that the show is interested in appealing to men who consider themselves intellectual, and perceive that this is currently, in American society, mutually exclusive with masculinity.

### *The Reinvention of Walter White*

Considering that Walt is now fifty years old, and there is no indication that his life has ever been different than it is at the beginning of the show, his change happens very quickly. Walt finds the ability to reinvent his life, which represents a significant aspect of individualism in American ideology. James V. Catano, in his book *Ragged*

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<sup>9</sup> Interestingly, this changes a great deal for Hank as the show goes on and his character is developed. In the first episode, there is not much redeemable about him, however: he is full of himself, uninteresting, and seemingly close-minded.

*Dicks*, which explores the history of American, masculine individualism, discusses this concept of self-reinvention, or self-making. He argues that, in masculine “brotherhoods,” such as found in industrial American workplaces, men are expected to live up to a certain conceptualization of masculinity; and, if this is not present for someone, then a man is considered “something else,” frequently feminine. This is clearly the position that Walt is in. He does not live up to the expectations for masculinity, not only regarding his job, but also regarding his lifestyle. Thus, it is perceived by other men (and Walt himself) that he is neglecting a certain masculine need in his life. Catano writes that “The regular enactment of these needs and fears of feminization and dependency is embodied in the appeal to self-making as freedom from determining physical origins” (9). That is, regardless of the position in which a man finds himself, the ideology of self-making insists that a man ought to be able to escape his current, feminized situation, and instead pursue a new, different life.

The catalyst for Walt’s change is that he is diagnosed with inoperable lung cancer after being taken to the hospital upon collapsing at the carwash, resulting in an MRI<sup>10</sup>. Walt is not a smoker, never has been, but nevertheless has in yet another way been dealt a seemingly unfair lot by life: with chemo, he has approximately two years to live. As the doctor reveals the diagnosis, Walt seems relatively uninterested, fixating on a mustard stain on the doctor’s tie. When the doctor repeats back the diagnosis,

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<sup>10</sup> An interesting parallel with Tony’s MRI in the pilot episode, which resulted in his seeing a psychotherapist.

incredulous that Walt has heard him, Walt repeats it back indifferently, making sure to point out the stain. Through this, Walt learns something important about himself: that he doesn't want to continue the life that he has been living. After all, he is going to die soon, and his life has become insignificant to him. And so, as would be the ideal reaction to such a revelation, Walt changes. On the following day, Walt is shown staring out the window at the carwash. When his boss, Bogdan, tells him that he's again short-handed and Walt will have to wipe down some cars, Walt doesn't care enough anymore to acquiesce, yelling, "Fuck you, Bogdan." When Bogdan is taken aback, asking him what he said, Walt responds, "I said fuck you! And your eyebrows!" as he knocks items off a pegboard sales rack. "Wipe down this!" he continues, walking out the store backwards, grabbing his crotch.

This newfound confidence of Walt manifests itself in a couple of other instances in the episode. When he's at a Goodwill with his family, shopping for pants for Walt Jr., who has cerebral palsy, a young group of boys makes fun of Walt Jr. from across the store. Walt stares indignantly as Skyler tries to encourage Walt Jr., calling the boys "obviously stupid." Then Walt turns around and walks out the back entrance only to emerge, moments later, at the front of the store. He walks up to the boys and kicks the biggest (and loudest) one on the back of the knee, making him stumble. When the boy recovers, Walt stands straight up to him, telling him to "take a shot, take it." The boy backs down and leaves with his group, Walt standing high. For the maybe the first time

in his life he is assertive, dominant, and unafraid—and he appears to be feeling like a new man. Additionally, at the end of the episode, Walt has another sexual encounter with Skyler, though this one portrays Walt as not the passive participant of the failed handjob rendezvous. As he and Skyler lie in bed, Walt confidently mounts Skyler; surprised, she asks if it is indeed him. Walt does not verbally respond. It is him, of course, but who he is, right now, is not who he was just days ago. His lack of communication reveals that he doesn't feel the need to answer his wife questions and provide her with reasons. Now, he is in charge.

The other part of Walt's reinvention, of course, is that he becomes involved in cooking meth. He decides to take Hank up on his offer for a ride along, during which Hank, his partner, and a SWAT team are busting a meth cooking operation. As the SWAT teams rushes into the house, chasing down one of the drug dealers and clearing the rooms, the meth cook—Jesse Pinkman, a former chemistry student of Walt's—climbs out the window over the garage, struggling to put on his clothes, and then jumps off the roof onto the ground. Jesse and Walt make eye contact, and then Jesse gets in a car and speeds down the road. Later, Walt appears at Jesse's house, proposing that he cook for Jesse (he is, after all, a master chemist) if Jesse helps him move the product. Jesse rejects the offer, but Walt strong arms him, telling him that he will turn him in if he doesn't comply. The reason Walt does this is ostensibly because he doesn't have the

money to pay for his hospital bills<sup>11</sup> and wants to provide for his family—not leave them with a plethora of financial struggles on top of the loss of him himself. But it is clear, even this early on, that Walt gets a rush out of this; when he tells Jesse to find a way to acquire the necessary funds to buy an RV they plan to cook meth in, Jesse remarks that he is not the Mr. White that he remembers from high school. When Walt claims that it's because he needs the money, Jesse responds, "Nah, come on! Man, some straight like you, giant stick up his ass, all of a sudden at age, what, sixty, he's just gonna break bad?" Jesse says that he's worried that Walt has had some sort of mental break that he should know about; Walt simply replies, "I am awake."

So, while Walt begins this pilot episode from a position of apathy and indifference to life, hitting fifty with little but regret, he has now gained *something*—life has become vibrant and meaningful for him. And, even though he says more than once that he is doing this for his family, it is clear that he gets enjoyment out of his new life. In this way, Walt's story appeals to the notion of reinvention of the self, a big part of American individualism. According to John P. Hewitt, a sociologist who has written on individuality in America, the notion of reinvention of the self in American culture is deeply-rooted: "Not only had the American Revolution brought forth upon the continent a new nation, but a 'new Adam,' a new and improved version of the human being, capable of remaking himself as he wished or as circumstances demanded" (94).

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<sup>11</sup> While riding to the hospital in the ambulance after collapsing at the carwash he asks the EMS to just drop him off at somewhere because he doesn't have good insurance.



He continues that “The idea of ‘self-reinvention’... recognizes individuals’ practical need to respond to new challenges and changing circumstances by adjusting, modifying, or rethinking their values, beliefs, and position in the social world. Indeed, it legitimates and valorizes the independent, mutable self that is free to remake itself in whatever way it desires.” Walt exercises this ability, changing drastically from a timid, apathetic, and frail man to a confident, controlling criminal.

Interestingly, however, Walt’s self-reinvention only becomes possible when Walt realizes that he is going to die. Of course, that we’re going to die is true of all of us, including Walt, but the *immediacy* of the reality of his death causes him to cease caring about living the proper, timid life that he has become accustomed to, though never satisfied with. In a sense, then, Walt’s previous, apathetic life is brought into question: if one finds oneself in a difficult social situation, systematically disrespected and undervalued even while being exceptionally intelligent and following all of the rules of American culture, then what is one to do? Living within the lines has not brought merited success and happiness, as goes the theory of meritocracy, but only disappointment and indifference to life. However, the resolution of this problem, for *Breaking Bad*, does not find itself in a reinvention or reformation of social institutions, or accepting one’s situation and trying to better it in a socially responsible way, but in reinvention of the self—if one wants a different life, the rhetoric goes, then one must change it for oneself.

*Walter White, Alpha Nerd*

The starkness of Walt's transition is glaringly apparent. Upon initially seeing Walt in his tight, white briefs, with his rigid, arthritic-looking body and obvious gut, it would seem humorous to suggest that this man could become a symbol of American individuality, much less masculinity. Throughout most of the first episode one would not be able to easily imagine him being anything other than his timid, impotent, fifty-year-old self. And yet, just halfway through the first season, one could no longer imagine any of these words as adjectives for Walt (except for his age, obviously, though even this aspect of him becomes less an inhibition as an indication of resourcefulness and grittiness). In his reinvention of himself, he has become a man who, though never imposing physically, is confident and risk-taking, willing to make difficult decisions. In other words, unlike Tony Soprano, he is not physically capable of manhandling almost anyone. Even in the first episode, when he kicks the teenager in the Goodwill, what stops the kid from retaliating is not Walt's biceps, but his sheer audacity: he tells the kid to take his one shot, implying that, if it isn't good enough, he will make him pay, as it were.

However, what really enables Walt's discovery of his masculinity is his intelligence. Late in the first episode, Walt and Jesse have made their first batch of meth and are trying to sell it. To do so, Jesse gets in contact with a drug dealer he knows named Krazy-8; Krazy-8 is also the cousin of Emilio, the man caught at the drug bust

Walt attended with Hank earlier in the episode, which Jesse escaped. Emilio, who is out on bail, thinks that Jesse set him up; to prove his legitimacy, Jesse drives with them into the desert to the RV where Walt is working. However, Emilio recognizes Walt from the bust and the situation quickly turns violent. Krazy-8 and Emilio pull their guns and Jesse knocks himself out on a rock after tripping while attempting to run away, seriously bruising his eye. They threaten to kill Walt, but they agree to his request to let him live if he teaches them how he cooks his world-class meth. While cooking, however, Walt mixes some of the chemicals together to create a deadly gas and then rushes out, slamming the RV door behind him. He manages to keep the two men in, even as they fire bullets at the door, and they quickly succumb to the vapors. Of course, these two men are by no means weaklings as they both appear to be strong and dangerous. But Walt uses his intellect, his knowledge of chemistry, to best them: a skill that he employs to deadly ends many times before the series is over.

One of the best examples of Walt's utilization of his knowledge of chemistry to dominate more masculine-seeming characters comes in the sixth episode of the first season, entitled "Crazy Handful of Nothin'." With Krazy-8 dead, Walt and Jesse do not have a drug dealer through which they can filter large amounts of meth, meaning that the pay-offs have been rather sparse; Jesse and his friends attempt to deal some of it, but they do not have the proper connections to move large amounts. When Walt pushes Jesse to figure out alternative ways of moving the meth, Jesse informs Walt that a man

named Tuco Salamanca has taken Krazy-8's position. Walt insists on meeting him, but Jesse protests saying, "You can't just bum rush some high-level iceman and start cutting deals." However, one of Jesse's friends, Skinny Pete, spent some time in jail with Tuco and tells Jesse that he can introduce him. When they meet, Jesse foolishly brings \$35,000 worth of meth with him (Walt is not at the meet); Tuco tries it and says it's great, but when Jesse asks for payment up front, Tuco refuses. Jesse senses the danger of the situation and tries to run, but is caught by two of Tuco's men. Tuco hands a canvas bag full of money toward Jesse, but then, as Jesse reaches for it, Tuco knocks him to the ground and beats him, claiming that "Nobody moves crystal in the South Valley but me, bitch!"

When Walt hears about what happened, he goes directly to Tuco's headquarters, alone. At this point, Walt is getting more comfortable with his austere persona. He shaves his head (which, though imminent due to his chemotherapy treatments, still makes him look much more intimidating) and employs a black top hat, along with a smirk of confidence. He also starts going by the name Heisenberg as his meth-cooking alias, arguably a rather arrogant choice for a meth cooker, though nonetheless reflecting well his new mad genius persona. He walks directly into the headquarters, carrying a bag of meth. He is made to wait outside of Tuco's office as Tuco examines the product. When Walt is let into the room, he tells Tuco that he wants \$50,000: \$35,000 for the meth he stole and another \$15,000 for Jesse's "pain and suffering." Tuco tries to intimidate

Walt, putting out a cigarette on his tongue and mocking Walt's defense of Jesse and his plan: "Let me get this straight...I steal your dope, I beat the piss out of your mule boy, and then you walk in here and bring me more meth?" Walt, unwavering, picks up a piece of the crystal that Tuco had been examining and says "You got one part of that wrong. This isn't meth," and then throws the material against the floor, causing a large explosion, blowing out the windows of the building causing glass and an air conditioning unit to rain down on the sidewalk in front of the building on top of some of Tuco's henchmen. When the dust settles, Walt threatens to throw the remainder of the bag of fake meth against the floor, but Tuco relents, saying "You got balls. I'll give you that," and agrees to give Walt the \$50,000, as well as to begin moving Walt's meth for him. Walt demands that the money be paid up front, and that Tuco agree to buy two pounds instead of one from him next week. Tuco, now in an acquiescing mood, agrees to these demands as well. Before Walt leaves, Tuco asks what the stuff is in the bag and Walt tells him that it's fulminated mercury, "a little tweak of chemistry." Tuco, like the audience, is impressed, recognizing that Walt just bested a high-ranking drug dealer through the use of his knowledge of chemistry. Of course, in this instance, as with others, Walt also appeals to traditional masculine values—nevertheless, his intelligence is what allows him to best his opponents.

As Walt exits the building, a crowd having gathered and sirens heard in the distance, blood seeps from Walt's nose, a side-effect of his chemotherapy. Nevertheless,

after he gets into the car, bag full on money in tow into which he shoves his hands, pulling out currency-strapped wads of cash, he revels in his victory. He grabs the steering wheel and begins what could best be described as growling, tensing up in adrenaline-infused satisfaction for what he has just accomplished. Once he calms down, a smirk develops on his face, playful harmonica-infused music playing in the background as he drives away. After all, he has managed, through his ingenuity and intelligence, to do what Jesse (and any other reasonably-minded person, surely) thought impossible. This moment also makes it clear that, even though Walt is still claiming to be doing all of this for the purpose of paying off his medical bills and leaving his family with some money, he receives a genuine thrill from his newfound abilities that he has never experienced before—and that he loves. Walt is not concerned about the cancer-reminding blood coming from his nose or his incessant coughing, he is simply thrilled with living his new life, with his escape from a banal, insignificant life into an adventurous, powerful one.

Walt's most incredible, and violent, concoction comes in the final episode of the series, entitled "Felina." At this late point in the series, much has occurred; currently, Walt is living in an isolated cabin in New Hampshire. He has been found out and has run from the police. Jesse is imprisoned by a group of white supremacists who are forcing him to cook meth, the same white supremacists who murdered Walt's brother-in-law, Hank. In the final scene of the series, Walt drives to their base, claiming that he

knows of a way to cook meth without methylene, an expensive and highly restricted ingredient in meth. He has offered to teach them this method for a millions dollars, claiming that he needs the money. When he arrives, they bring Jesse into the building where they are meeting and threaten to kill Walt, vehemently denying his offer (which Walt never intended them to accept in the first place). Walt pretends to be enraged with Jesse and tackles him. As he does so, he pushes a button on his car keys that cause the trunk to open and an m-16, which he rigged on a rail meant for garage door openers, sprays bullets into the building, killing all of the men save for Jesse, Walt, and a couple from the gang, who are quickly disposed of, one by Jesse, one by Walt. This invention serves as Walt's crowning achievement, working perfectly and once again making Walt's intelligence the attribute necessary for overcoming his foes.

Walt's modification of traditional masculinity, to entail not only strength of personality but also intelligence, also speaks a great deal about contemporary American culture. It is no longer portrayed as feminine for a man to be a "nerd," uninterested in muscles and powerful cars. Instead, through the increasing value of technical prowess in our postindustrial society, it has become an enviable attribute. Hence, throughout the twentieth century and more obviously in the twenty-first, nerds have become not only successful, but cool. As Chris Coleman is quoted in Andrew Harrison's article from *The Guardian* entitled "Rise of the geeks: how the outsiders won," "The working environment has become so harsh that young people think that if they're going to

succeed they'll have to do it for themselves. Though geek first appeared as a kind of anti-fashion statement, it's becoming bound up with entrepreneurialism, self-motivation and independence instead of weakness." One could certainly see Walt as an extension of this trend, which, as Coleman argues, is rooted in economic issues, especially regarding education. Because success is so dependent on level and caliber of educative experience, it has become not only financially beneficial but cool to be smart, even if the individual is not physically imposing or socially inclined. Hence, the value of intellectualized individualism in *Breaking Bad* is appealed to rhetorically, the narrative arguing for the merit of intelligence, along with assertive behavior. The effect of this appeal, understood through the context of contemporary American culture, is that Walt is an immensely likeable character—regardless of any anaesthetized immoral actions.

### *The Antisocial Antihero*

Even though, unlike Tony Soprano, Walt appeals directly to educated intellect, like Tony, he is portrayed as morally complicated, and, more blatantly than Tony, immensely anti-social. After all, his initial justification for getting involved in the meth business—to provide for his family—is shown many times, especially as the show progresses, to be mostly (if not entirely) untrue. This point is made especially apparent in the final episode of the series. Since Walt has run away, he has spent a few months without leaving a cabin in New Hampshire (supplies are brought to him by a man he



hired to set him up somewhere safe) and he is not enjoying his new life. Upon being told by his son over the phone that he wishes Walt would die, Walt decides to turn himself in, leaving the phone off the hook so that the police can track it, assuming that Walter Jr. would call the police (he does). However, as Walt sits, waiting, he watches part of a Charlie Rose segment in which Rose is interviewing Walt's old business associate and wife, Gretchen and Elliot Schwartz, who claim that Walt had little to do with the founding of their company, save for contributing to the name. (This is the same couple that offered to cover Walt's medical fees and give him a good job.) Of course, Walt had, in fact, a great deal to do with the founding of the company. The company is now worth 2 billion dollars—a contribution both to Walt's previous disappointment and his frustration—and has donated 28 million dollars to drug rehab clinics. When Rose asks if they did this in an attempt to mitigate their perceived connection with Walt is when they minimize his input in the success of the company. When Walt sees this, he leaves, furious, and drives back to New Mexico, refusing to turn himself in.

This portrayal of the Schwartzes is cynical toward charity, encouraging the notion that charitable actions are motivated out of self-interest and simultaneously encouraging the audience to sympathize with Walt. The Schwartzes lie out of self-interest when they say that Walt had little to do with the company, a motivation that they just seconds before denied being behind their giving money to drug rehab facilities. Not only that, but Walt reveals this anger at the Schwartzes' downplaying of

his participation in the company he helped found to be enough to cause him to drive back to New Mexico, set his son up with a massive inheritance (over 9 million dollars) while also getting to intimidate and condemn the Schwartzes, murder a bunch of racist men who killed his brother-in-law and his partner, save Jesse's life, and go out with a bang instead of rotting in prison or freezing to death in an isolated wilderness somewhere, while not having to compromise his stance one bit. Walt's actions are portrayed as heroic. He saves Jesse, who deserved being saved; he helps his son who he knows will have a hard time ever thinking well of him; he does the "right" thing as far as Hank is concerned by revealing the location of his body. After all, in some ways, this is why Walt got into the meth business in the first place: he wanted to help his family. There have, of course, been horrible consequences (most notably being Hank's death), but most of those were things that Walt couldn't directly control; sure, they were partly his fault, but he didn't actually pull the trigger and could never have foreseen what happened, it could reasonably be argued (as the show itself argues).

In some ways, then, Walter White indeed finds himself in a similar situation to Tony Soprano. Both characters are morally complex, and there are many moments in both of these shows in which the show makes it very obvious that the character is doing what would appear to be an immoral action. But there is always enough to keep it complicated so that an audience resists moral judgments. If we utterly judge a protagonist as immoral (correlative with dislike, ideally), we wouldn't watch the show.

What keeps these series interesting is that they are filled with strong, complex men, which by no means is a difficult feat to pull off. Vince Gilligan, the creator of *Breaking Bad*, has said that he thought that Bryan Cranston is one of the few men who he thinks can pull that sort of complexity off, leaving the audience truly ambivalent. The problem with this is that, not only is it not an true-to-life portrayal (though it ostensibly is so), but the perspective is limited to accommodate an individualistic bent.

Consider, for example, the way that the show portrays the consequences of meth usage, although, throughout its six seasons, there is actually very little to consider. Jesse is doing meth when the show begins, and struggles with addiction for a few episodes. However, once he straightens his life around, his incessant drug usage stops. He has a couple of friends who play fairly-prominent roles in the first season who are also meth users, who are portrayed as unintelligent and lower-class (potentially encouraging a deterministic view of drug usage). Other than these few instances, however, there is shockingly little habitual meth usage in the show by any of the characters. Not only are these peripheral perspectives not included, the drug world is highly glamorized altogether, appearing to be a life of drama, money, power, and so on. Erin Rose, for an article that was published on *Salon*, spent time with and interviewed low-level drug dealers in Albuquerque, the same town *Breaking Bad* is based in. Based on her accounts, the drug business is nothing like it is portrayed on *Breaking Bad*: "Mention 'Albuquerque' and 'drugs,'" she writes, "and chances are someone will squeal

'Breaking Bad!' Walter White's transformation from a cancer-stricken chemistry teacher to a successful drug lord made great television, but for most dealers here in Albuquerque, selling will never be so bloody, nor so profitable. They are cogs in a multi-billion dollar industry." She explains that few of the drug dealers make anything more than minimum wage, and it is essentially impossible to move up the ranks. Most of the time, unlike Walt, they do it out of financial necessity, and really don't want to move up the ranks, since doing so would automatically turn one into an outlaw, making it near impossible to function in regular society.

Additionally, Tony Soprano's story shares a key aspect with Walter Walt's that keeps their self-interest from ever having long-term consequences: they both die at the end of the narrative; when their narratives are over, so are the shows. In *Ragged Dicks*, Catano discusses the similarly-dramatic death of Schwarzenegger's Terminator character at the end of *Terminator 2*, explaining that it enacts "a heroic agency that revitalizes the rhetoric of separation and sadomasochism that lurks at the heart of the dominant myth of masculine self-making" (215). That is, as with Walt, the masculinized Terminator cannot function within society as a typical actor, but must be separated from society to maintain its masculine appeal. After all, as a man gets older, his masculine abilities fade; he is weak and impotent, unable to perform necessary functions of masculine behavior.

As a contrast to a strong male lead dying at the end of a drama series, consider HBO's recently-aired mini series, *True Detective*, finds its protagonists in a very different situation at the end of the show. While both of the lead characters, played by Matthew McConaughey and Woody Harrelson, are in some ways figures of masculinity throughout the show—McConaughey's character is a disturbed genius loner, and Harrelson's a womanizing, old-boy kind of man. What makes their stories different is that don't die in the end, but instead are forced to deal with the self-involved and anti-social decisions that they have made in their lives. Walt, on the other hand, even more so than Tony (whose death is disputed by some), dies a strong, uncompromising self-made man.

### *Conclusion*

Ultimately, then, all of the ways in which *Breaking Bad* discourses with contemporary American life relate to the notion that television is not something that merely affects us but is something that we, as a culture, determine; as if, in a way, television mirrors culture. The reason that these television shows are interesting is because they afford us an experience that allows us to indulge in a narrative of gained importance and meaning while also sticking it to the man, while also appealing to our conception of moral complexity of individuals and the world in which we live. However, it does so not through a realistic, broad-perspective narrative, but through an unrealistic, individualized, and highly-idealized one. The point, then, is not that these

shows are morally problematic, or that the world and the people in it are not complex. Instead, it is that, in their appeal, they represent social and individual attitudes about ourselves and one another, which themselves are not necessarily bad or untrue, merely present. Surely, *Breaking Bad*, like *The Sopranos*, finds the meaning and resolution in strong individuals, and, regardless of apparent moral complexity, bend the narrative to cause actions with severe social consequences seem not only forgivable, but admirable.

## Conclusion

### The Rhetoric of the System

*You start to tell the story, you think you're the hero, and you get done talking and...*

- James McNulty

*The Wire*, which debuted on HBO in 2002, has come to occupy a peculiar position in television's Third Golden Age. The show, while widely considered one of the most critically-acclaimed series in television history, never attained the viewership of shows like *The Sopranos* (which was also on HBO, at the same time) or *Breaking Bad*. *The Sopranos* enjoyed over 13 million viewers for the premiere of its fourth season (Ryan, 2006), and *Breaking Bad* experienced substantial viewer success, as well, up to over 10 million for its finale (Kissell, 2013); *The Wire*, on the other hand, peaked at just 4 million viewers, and for its final season had many fewer (Bianco, 2008). In drawing attention to these contrasting statistics, I want to shy away from the argument that more viewers equals a lesser show, critically speaking. However, seeing as the Third Golden Age demonstrates that 'quality television' can be commercially successful (i.e., there is a consumer demand for it) it would follow that *The Wire* should have been able to do both, since it was (and is) widely considered an excellent show, debuting in the wake of *The Sopranos*. However, for some reason, it never reached the mass appeal of HBO's cornerstone series.

Hence, in this conclusion chapter, I am going to begin with thinking about why it is that *The Wire*, though critically-acclaimed, was never exceptionally popular, and what this has to do with the ways in which the show works with individualist and collectivist ideology. *The Wire* has become known for its exploration of collectivist concerns, focusing on the ways in which dysfunctional collectivities impact individual subjects within the collectivity. To do so, the show focuses on various social institutions in Baltimore: the first season focuses on illegal drug trade and law enforcement; the second, the unions and work at the seaport; the third, the political system; the fourth, the education system; and the fifth and final season focuses on print news. By examining these unique systems as themselves interconnected, the show points to the complexity and challenge of institutional reform, while refusing to find resolution in individual effort. In other words, systemic change takes systemic effort.

In discussing *The Wire*'s emphasis on the social, I want to first look at the ways in which *The Wire* is similar to *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*. The show does enact many of the same appeals to individualism as these shows. Characters such as Stringer Bell and Omar Little are full of intrigue, and the show's hero, at least for the first season, is Detective James McNulty, a dysfunctional cop who's bad at life but good at fighting crime. However, what is mostly of interest with *The Wire*, in pertaining to thinking about the rhetoric of individuality and collectivity, is how it is different from *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, especially how it subverts its own individualistic tropes. As



Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall write about the series, “Events [in *The Wire*] have consequences, but they are denied grandeur” (6). This is true especially when it comes to individual actions. Unlike in *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, individuals in *The Wire* do not function within a closed arena where innocence is denied each character as morality ostensibly hangs in the balance. In *The Wire*, there are actually good-intentioned individuals who suffer the perils of a collectivity gone awry, and they are helpless to overcome it. In other words, individuals do act immorally, and the show (like *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*) complicates the black and whiteness of such situations; but what is also portrayed is the consequences of immoral actions on other individuals (with whom the audience has sympathy) within a collectivity.

One of the ways of thinking about this difference is in terms of narrative scope, which refers to the extent of perspectives portrayed in a given narrative. In its attempt to envelope multiple facets of a community within its narrative, it can be said that *The Wire* has a more expansive narrative scope than the other shows that I have examined. In *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, the narrative lens is defined by the protagonists’ perspectives. Hence, when Walt or Tony acts immorally, most of what we see is their perspective, along with all of their justifying reasons for committing an act. In *The Wire*, however, as demonstrated by the character of Stringer Bell, antiheroic characters do not enjoy such a limited perspective, instead enveloped in the socially-focused narrative of the series. While the understandability of Stringer’s actions are not excluded, nor are the

consequences that his actions have on other subjects in the Baltimore collectivity.

Hence, the narrative is broad and inclusive, continuously examining the ways in which a collectivity of individuals, a system, is something greater than the story of any one individual—both in its purpose and in its dysfunctionality.

The ultimate subversion of individualism that the series enacts is through the way it demythologizes the status of individuals. Much of this certainly occurs through the expansion of narrative scope in the way that it depicts consequences of actions; however, the way that the narrative deals with the deaths of some of its characters, most notably the death of Omar Little, also speaks volumes about the way that the show thinks about individuals within a collectivity. In both *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, when the principal individual is killed (supposedly, when it comes to Tony Soprano), the story ends: the narratives are their narratives. In *The Wire*, however, the story continues even after a primary character dies or is seemingly forgotten by the narrative. Surely, it would be difficult to name a single character in the show whose death would have ended the show, or even slowed it down much, for that matter. The show sees individuals as reliant on and intrinsically a part of a collectivity that defines the limits of what individuals are capable of—defines the spaces, even, that individuals can occupy within a collectivity, once again promoting the act of societal reform.

### *The Scope of the System*

In first looking at the ways in which *The Wire*, like *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad*, seems to support individualistic sentiments, I am going to focus on two primary characters of the show: Stringer Bell and Omar Little. Stringer, played by Idris Elba, is second-in-command of Avon Barksdale's Baltimore drug operation. Largely, he functions as a more practical and business-minded voice behind Avon, keeping him insulated from direct dealings and offering him practical advice. Even though he isn't in charge of the operation, he becomes a much greater interest of the show than Avon himself. This seems to be because Stringer is a character that is strong and resourceful, willing to make difficult decisions and yet always refreshingly self-reflective. His ultimate goal is to make his and Avon's business eventually legitimate, which he works toward by developing a condominium complex, even paying off politicians to help him move the process along. In addition, he takes economics classes at Baltimore City Community College, receiving all As and appealing to a sense of meritocracy, in that he is motivated, resourceful, and works hard to attain success. It seems that, even though he does commit some heinous crimes, he still somehow deserves to become legitimately successful.

However, Stringer's appeal, in some situations, is not insulated from his criminal actions; that is, the show is not as thorough in providing complicating details that make judgment difficult as a show like *The Sopranos*, which provides understandable and

legitimate reasons for nearly every unsavory act of its protagonist. For example, like Tony, Stringer orders the murders of semi-prominent characters and, like Walt, he is heavily involved in the drug world; but, unlike both Walt and Tony, Stringer is not so favored by the narrative in *The Wire*. The audience does sympathize with him, but is also aware of the true social consequences of his actions. Therefore, the narrative scope of the series contributes some narrative distance with its characters, being that they are not altogether impartially depicted.

For example, when a young drug hopper named Wallace is killed by one of his friends, on an order from Stringer, the audience is confronted with the reality of Stringer's position as a drug dealer. Wallace, a young boy of sixteen, has become an especially sympathetic character in the series, in part because he watches over many of the younger children in the projects, fixing their lunches and helping them off to school. But, like Stringer, he wants to get out of the drug world. In the fifth episode of the first season (entitled "The Pager") we are given a visceral reason behind Wallace's antipathy for the business. After spotting Omar Little, a man who has made a career out of sticking up the Barksdale organization, Wallace informs Stringer of their whereabouts, which results in the brutal killing of Omar's boyfriend; Stringer orders his crew to hang the dead body in the projects as a sign of what happens to those who fight against Avon's organization. Wallace, disgusted by Stringer's decision, tells D'Angelo (a mid-level manager and nephew of Avon who also expresses hesitance about the business he

is in) that he wants to get out of the projects and go back to school; D'Angelo gives him some money and encourages him to do so. The narrative clearly generates audience sympathy for Wallace with this, as the young boy attempts to transcend his social situation and better himself.

However, while leaving, Wallace is picked up by the police and agrees to cooperate with their investigation of Avon's organization. However, after months of being away from his friends while staying with his aunt in Maryland, waiting to be called as a witness and yet being neglected by the police, Wallace decides he wants to return to the projects and get back into the drug world. Upon hearing of his return, Stringer is suspicious and orders Wallace's old friend "Bodie" to kill him, which, though hesitantly, he does. The murder happens in the same room that Wallace usually cares for some of the younger children of the projects. The show's message is clear here: in "converting this space of innocence and safety into a terrifying and bloody crime scene" (Klein, 178), it portrays the unfair position of those neglected by society, and the hopelessness of going against the grain in some cases, even when personal betterment is the ultimate goal.

It is definitely true that it is in Stringer's best interest to get rid of Wallace. As with the other shows that I have discussed, *The Wire* makes it plain that there is a rationale behind Stringer's actions: namely, if Wallace is dissatisfied with his life in the drug business, he is likely to become an informant, therefore making killing him, in this

case, a smart business decision. But, at the same time, the simplicity of this matter, as it is portrayed, is disturbing. Some may see a correlation between this and Tony's killing of a gangster-turned-informant in "College." However, the difference is that Wallace is portrayed as a genuinely good, largely innocent person, unlike Tony's victim, or Walt's for that matter. Hank indeed ends up dead indirectly because of Walt, and he does let Jesse's girlfriend die after an overdose. But in both of these cases, the acts are either unintentional consequences or passive non-acts, respectively. With Stringer, however, the show, while sympathetic with his character, rejects impartially favoring him over and against other characters. Thus, even though Stringer himself wants to eventually get out, just like Wallace, his acts are depicted for what they are: immoral in the consequences that they entail. And the show ultimately does so by creating audience sympathy with a character; the audience understands why Wallace wants out, and they understand why he wants back in; they even understand why Stringer orders his death. However, what remains looming in the background is the reason behind all of it: in attempting to transcend the limitations that a society has placed on individuals, these individuals comes face-to-face with the sheer power of social institutions, along with the sheer impotence of individual effort to change these institutions.

In a somewhat ironic development of the plot, Stringer's story ends very similarly to Wallace's. In his struggle against Avon to legitimize their business, he is perpetually confronted with the impossibility of his hope for change. As Avon himself

says, Stringer is “not hard enough for this right here [the drug business] and maybe, just maybe, not smart enough for them out there” (3.8), indicating that Stringer’s attempts to transition to legitimate business have been doomed from the beginning. In this, Stringer is doubtlessly a sympathetic character, a testament to the complexity and depth of character development in the show. Ultimately, however, Stringer’s attempts to develop the condominium are continuously clogged by bureaucratic processes that he doesn’t know how to work through; he finds out that the politician he has been paying off has been doing nothing to help him, instead simply lining his pockets—in this case, an action considered more legitimate business by the dysfunctional system than Stringer’s efforts to become legitimate.

Then, in the third season, Omar and another man track Stringer down and kill him as retribution for Stringer’s ordering the murder of Omar’s boyfriend. After his death, Detective McNulty searches Stringer’s apartment and is taken aback by the sophistication of Stringer’s dwelling place. He picks up Stringer’s copy of Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations* and asks “Who the fuck was I chasing?” (3.12). In a sense, the audience may be asking a similar question about Stringer. After all, we do sympathize with him even after he does terrible things. However, we don’t do so because the show justifies his motivations—we do so because the show points out that he doesn’t really have much of a choice in the matter. Both are ways of setting up audience sympathy

with a character, but only *The Wire* demythologizes the status of the individual while placing greater emphasis on societal reform.

### *Demythologizing the Individual*

Like Stringer, Omar Little is an intelligent and resourceful antiheroic-type character; but unlike Stringer, Omar is sold out to his lifestyle and doesn't have illusions of cleaning up his act. He uses his talents, along with his propensity for violence, to make a living holding up drug dealers—although, due to the acclaim and fearfulness that he has garnered on the streets, many dealers simply hand over their money to him when he comes calling with his shotgun. As he walks through the streets, hunting drug dealers, he whistles “Farmer in the Dell,” causing children to run, proclaiming Paul Revere style that “Omar coming!” Nevertheless, he acts on a strict moral code; he never kills innocent civilians, for example. In addition, he's gay, a fact that the show never shies away from, which refreshingly subverts typical masculinized portrayals of violence. Omar largely becomes fascinating as an individual because of the ways that he confronts dysfunctional systems, both when it comes to the drug trade and social issues. For example, while testifying at a hearing for a man in the drug business, Omar is cross-examined by the defendant's lawyer, Maurice Levy, whom the audience has become familiar with for the legal help he provides Avon's business. Omar, sitting in the testimonial box wearing a shirt that reads “I am the American dream,” honestly



describes his “occupation” of ripping off drug dealers as Levy attempts to discredit his testimony.

**Levy:** You are amoral, are you not? You are feeding off the violence and the despair of the drug trade. You're stealing from those who themselves are stealing the lifeblood from our city. You are a parasite who leeches off...

**Omar:** Just like you, man.

**Levy:** ...the culture of drugs. Excuse me, what?

**Omar:** I got the shotgun. You got the briefcase. It's all in the game, though, right?

Through this kind of scenario, the show does valorize the strong individuality of Omar, with his willingness to stand up against hypocrisy, along with his ability to overcome the dysfunctional institution of the drug business. In a way, then, he is set up as the perfect individual hero for the show, and sometimes functions as such.

Nevertheless, he never becomes a consistent primary character in the show, instead lurking in the shadows to occasionally steal the spotlight. And, more significantly, when he is killed in the final season of the show, his death, like Stringer's and Wallace's, seems to withhold individual meaning, as the show moves on without him. Marlo, with whom Omar has been feuding, hires a young boy to shoot the unsuspecting Omar in the side of the head. He doesn't die gloriously in a final shootout or get knocked off by a professional killer; he's killed by a child after buying a pack of cigarettes. In the morgue, the tag on his dead body is accidentally switched with

another's, further pointing to the meaninglessness of his death. Ultimately, like others in the show, he will be replaced and, unlike him, the system continues, largely unaltered.

This is the way that *The Wire* thinks of individuals: as products of a system, a system that has not been designed with many of their best interests in mind. Unlike Tony and Walt, no individual in the show is necessary, and each attempt to fight against a dysfunctional system is stifled by bureaucracy—by the system itself. And I would ultimately suggest that this has something to do with the lack of popularity of the show. What makes shows like *The Sopranos* and *Breaking Bad* so enjoyable is not only that they are excellently produced and acted (this is likewise true of *The Wire*), but that they offer narratives of individuals who transcend the system to form their own individualized realities; that is, they function within vacuums and are largely unhindered by outside social forces. Walt and Tony do both end up dead in the end, but their deaths signify the end of the story, the end of what is interesting and meaningful about a specific character in a specific time and place. When someone dies in *The Wire*, on the other hand, the death looms and seems endlessly repeatable, being a product of systemic—and not individual—dysfunction. The same is true of characters who do not die but have idealistic visions of reform, including McNulty, the alcoholic cop who, after a couple of seasons, cleans up his act, gets married, and largely fades out of focus. In the first season, McNulty knows that, to really fight the drug world, you have to take

it seriously and use whatever means necessary, including surveillance and wiretaps.

However, his attempts to do so are mostly hindered by the department's administrators who want quick results. The same is also true of Roland Pryzbylewski, who, after being disgraced as a cop in the first season, becomes a school teacher. He cares for the kids he is teaching, but can't help them learn well because of the education system's fixation with standardized testing. He watches, exasperated, as the bureaucratic system, in the yet another way, does more harm than good, and he is unable to single-handedly fix it.

### *Conclusion*

This thesis isn't meant to deride television as a whole. Placing *The Wire* in a category separate from highly individualistic shows is not meant to imply that it is the only show that questions norms and challenges viewers. For example, as mentioned in chapter one, HBO's recently finished first season of *True Detective* subverts the grandeur of individualism by portraying its two highly individualistic protagonists as older men dealing with the consequences of their anti-social behaviors as younger men; unlike Walt and Tony, they don't die—they just grow old. In addition, *Game of Thrones*—now the most watched HBO series of all time, recently passing *The Sopranos* for number of viewers—challenges viewer expectations that, at least sometimes, good guys come out on top; they rarely do, signifying the consequences of power. Indeed, there are surely a mass of television producers, writers, directors, and actors, many of whom I have not discussed, who strive to create meaningful, self-aware television dramas. And surely,

the Third Golden Age has opened the door for television to become a more serious and artistic medium. Nevertheless, as some of these shows demonstrate themselves, crafting a successful television program that subverts audience expectations is not a simple feat.

In addition, as I wrote in the introduction, this thesis is not really meant as a critique of individualism as a theory; I am not focused on the merits of a particular philosophy so much as the ways in which cultural philosophy manifests itself, through rhetorical appeals, in popular culture in the twenty-first century. Hence, what I have instead focused on is the ways in which the rhetoric of individualism is employed in some contemporary ‘quality television’ shows to provide for a more entertaining experience, depicting idealized narratives of mythic-like individuals, both in the ways that they justify the protagonists’ actions and neglect perspectives that would involve drawing attention to the social effects of these actions. The problem, then, isn’t individualism, necessarily, but unrealistic depictions of individuals that reflect how we prefer to think about individual action—as closed, impartial, and inherently justified. And the ways in which these narratives are crafted points to how current American culture perceives the meaning of individuals and collectivities, along with the relationship the former has to the latter.

However, it is true that the majority of television functions rather strictly as entertainment; and, while there’s nothing inherently wrong with entertainment, I would argue that entertainment that functions by appealing to false tropes and ideology

that relies upon avoidance of social concerns and consequences may not be entirely harmless or inconsequential. Ultimately, then, one of the efforts of this thesis is to rethink the way that we approach entertainment. As I quoted Chesebro in the introduction, entertainment and values don't function independently from one another—entertainment is often derived through the values exhibited through the resolution of conflict and tension. Thus, when a show depicts the life or livelihood of a character as being at stake, and someone (usually the protagonists), through individual effort, 'saves the day,' the ideology behind the show is that conflicts are effectively resolved through individual effort. Of course, there's an innumerable amount of possible variations for how a plot such as this could be set up, which could demonstrate a host of different ideological underpinnings. In the case of the shows that I have looked at, along with many other contemporary television shows, what we see is that, time and time again, television series promote radical individualism while they demonize institutions.

While more discussion needs to be given to the questions that this thesis approaches, there is doubtlessly an immense relevance of the question of cultural understandings of individualism and collectivism to contemporary American culture. During an interview with *Vice*, David Simon, the creator of *The Wire*, discussed television's bent toward individualism:

Simon: ... Now, the thing that has been exalted and the thing that American entertainment is consumed with is the individual being bigger than the institution. How many frickin' times are we gonna watch a story where somebody...

Pearson: Rises up against the odds?

Simon: "You can't do that." "Yes, I can." "No, you can't." "I'll show you, see?"  
And in the end he's recognized as just a goodhearted rebel with right on his side, and eventually the town realizes that dancing's not so bad. I can make up a million of 'em. That's the story we want to be told over and over again. And you know why? Because in our heart of hearts what we know about the 21st century is that every day we're going to be worth less and less, not more and more.

In looking closely at *Breaking Bad* and *The Sopranos*, I have demonstrated that some current television shows indicate that Americans' thoughts about individualism in twenty-first century are heavily conflicted. As Simon points to in this interview, it may very well be the case that the popularity of individualistic themes in American television reflects Americans' crisis of individualism.

As all Americans have witnessed in the past few years, there is a deeply felt unrest regarding rising inequality, along with a deepening partisanship in the political system. Because of this, it makes sense that we should find television shows that bask in

radical individual interesting and entertaining. Similarly, as many recent polls have indicated, Americans' distrust of their government has been steadily decreasing since the Vietnam War; a poll conducted last year by Pew Research found that less than twenty percent of Americans fully, or even mostly, trust their government. However, as the Occupy Wall Street movement demonstrated, change is challenging and difficult as rethinking the roles and functions of social institutions (and regulation) is a complex and exasperating task. Nevertheless, ignoring this difficulty in mainstream media and focusing instead on mythic tales of unrealistic and impossible antiheroes does not encourage what Americans may need most in a time of uncertainty: the truth.

I do not mean to put idealistic constraints on television; to be sure, there's nothing wrong with portraying fire-breathing dragons or non-existent worlds. However, each of the shows that I have looked at dialogue with the real world and portray their narratives as if within it. Consequently, they deal with real issues (whether directly or not) and comment on real life in twenty-first century America. Ultimately, then, the question that may need answered is what we want from television. Ideally, entertainment could function independently from ideology or complicated value systems; nevertheless, the truth is that it doesn't. Maybe, in a sense, this would help explain Americans' ambivalence toward television that I discussed in the introduction: like many things that we consume it fulfills a desire, only to leave us uncertain if it's what we really wanted—or, for that matter, if it's what we really needed.

The presumption about many of the shows of the Third Golden Age is that they are not only entertaining, but that they are artistic and meaningful. And while it is definitely true that the shows that I have looked at are successful on many levels, when it comes to what drives their entertainment it's difficult to see much else but appeals to fairly prototypical individualistic values modified to appeal especially to a contemporary audience. Hence, in these shows, I have shown that the presence of morally problematic protagonists isn't for the purpose of challenging viewers to consider deep moral questions about an individual's responsibility to his or her collective wholes; the narratives are clearly not designed for that purpose. Instead, moral complexity is meant to rhetorically appeal to an audience whose understanding of morality has changed—whose understanding of themselves has changed.



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